

異世界料理道

VOLUME
8

Cooking with
wild game.

Author.
EDA
Illust.
こちも

Cooking with Wild Game

— Isekai Ryouridou —

- Volume 8 -

-Author-

Eda

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[Skythewood]

「君だよね。

俺に話つて何だらう?」

「言つておくけど、
アタシの話は長いヨ?
納得のいく答えを聞くまで、
アタシはルテイムの家に
戻る気もないからサ!」

ツヴァイは「フン!」と鼻息を噴いて、
細つこい腕を細つこい胸の前で組む。



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俺は何の 気もなしに玄関の戸板を引き開けたのだが

そこで「うわーつ」とひと声さけび、思わずへたり込むことになってしまった。

「大丈夫ですか、アスター？」

「あはは。アスター、かつて悪ーい！」

アマ・ミン＝ルティムの心配げな声と、

リミ＝ルウの無邪気な笑い声が響く。

そこには、巨大な物体が立ちはだかっていた。
宿場町ではお馴染みの、

恐鳥トトスである。

いきなりこんなものが
玄関口で待ち受けていたら、

誰だって仰天はすると思う。

「二生、私のそばにいてくれ。

私も一生、お前のかたわらに
あると誓う」

背中に回された
アイリフアの両腕が、
碎けんばかりに
俺の胸をしめつけてくる。

同じ力で抱きすくめることはできなかつたが
俺は、アイリフアの背中にそつと腕を回した。

Chapter 1

Gilulu the Totos

Part 1

After a series of incidents concluded with Tay Tsun's death, four days have passed. On the 20th of the Blue month, two women visited the Fa house.

"Is Asuta or Ai Fa home? We are Ema Min Lutim of the Lutim house and Rimee Wu of the Wu clan."

I had finished my work in the Post Station Town and returned home when I heard them. I was preparing the ingredients for tomorrow's business with a knife in hand. Rii Sudora went home directly today, and the women in the neighborhood didn't come to learn cooking from me, so I was home alone.

"Yes, please wait a moment."

I placed the knife and aria back on the chopping board and stood up quickly.

It was rare seeing Ema Min Lutim and Rimee Wu together, and they didn't make me feel wary. So I opened the door leading outside without a second thought... and fell onto the ground with a "Uwah~"

"Asuta, are you alright?"

"Ahaha, Asuta is so uncool!"

I could hear Ema Min Lutim's worried voice and the innocent laughter of Rimee Wu. A large thing was between the two of them, blocking the entrance.

It was a Totos Moa, which could be frequently found in the Post Station Town.

"W-W-What is this? Why is there a Totos in Forest's Edge?"

“It’s a long story. This Totos was caught in the forest by the men from the Sauti clan.”

Ema Min Lutim had a face of guilt and apologized to me as I remained seated on the ground with her head low.

“I should have warned you earlier. I didn’t know you would be so shocked... Pardon me.”

“I-It’s fine. I’m sorry for showing such a pitiful sight.”

I apologized too, but anyone would be surprised to find such a huge thing appearing suddenly at the entrance.

Moa Totos was a type of large bird, and was twice the size of an ostrich, reaching heights of 3 m or so.

Even though the appearance of the Totos looked just like an ostrich, they were covered with brown feathers. Their bodies were oval, and their neck looked like a Loch Ness monster. Their powerful legs were each supported firmly by three talons on the ground. The Totos were much larger than an ostrich and had an amazing presence. It had to weigh more than 200 kg.

I would see Totos in the Post Station Town every day, but encountering such a huge creature from close up still filled me with awe. A kick from its powerful clawed feet would definitely be lethal.

But Ema Min Lutim let the gigantic Moa stand beside her nonchalantly. There was a rein on the Totos’ neck and beak, and Ema Min Lutim’s supple fingers were holding the other end of it.

“It’s amazing, right? This is a Totos! It’s the first time Rimee is touching one!”

Rimee Wu slowly hugged the right thigh of the Totos and then ground the brown feathers with her cheeks. After seeing her do that, I cried in a panic: “R-Rimee Wu! That’s dangerous!”

“It’s fine. Totos is a docile animal. If we don’t hurt it, it won’t attack humans.”

Ema Min Lutim was showing her usual smile.

It had been about ten days since I last saw her, and she was warm, gentle, and beautiful as before. Her brown hair was cut in a bold short style, seldom found in amongst the denizens of Forest's Edge. Her firm and tender body was covered in a large piece of cloth, a sign that she was married. She was the young spouse of my irreplaceable good friend Kaslan Lutim.

On the other hand, Rimee Wu was energetic as usual. She had an innocent smile on her face as she shook her red hair that seemed fluffier than the Totos' feathers. She was wearing a children's attire that resembled a western style dress that covered just one shoulder. Her body was so petite that she might be smaller than a Totos' leg.

“...So, what is all this about? Why are you bringing the Totos that the Sauti clan found to the Fa house? My imagination is too lacking to understand how did you arrive at this decision.”

“Yes. Five days ago, when the people from the city visited Forest's Edge, they let a few Totos run loose in the forest. We think this is one of the Totos that survived. The men from the Sauti clan caught this Totos during their hunt and weren't sure what to do with it. So they sent it to the Lutim house village.”

I see, Kamyua Yost's posse that disguised themselves as a caravan set up with ten-odd Totos and only returned with two, so the rest must have escaped into the woods. That would explain why a lost Totos they found in the forest was wearing reins.

However, there was something I still didn't understand.

Why did the Sauti clan ask the Lutim house to take care of the Totos?

“The Sauti clan was planning to learn bloodletting and butchering techniques from the Lutim house. But this matter was postponed because of all the troubles that happened after the house head conference. Dali Sauti finally came to our village today personally.”

“I see, Dali Sauti has recovered enough to walk.”

“That's right. In order to prepare for the meeting with Genos and the nobles, he needs to discuss with Donda Wu ahead of time. He intends to lodge at the Lutim house to fulfill his promise too.”

Regarding our business in the Post Station Town, the Sauti clan remained cautiously

neutral. But they were very eager to learn how to cook delicious meals. Hence, they asked the Lutim house to impart the bloodletting and butchering techniques to them. As for why the Sauti clan asked the Lutim house instead of the Wu clan? Maybe they were concerned about both of them being tribal chief clans. Or maybe Dali Sauti got along really well with Kaslan Lutim. I didn't know the details.

After all, both the Wu clan and Lutim house were quite a far distance from the Sauti clan. The Sauti were situated at the southern end of Forest's Edge, and walking to the Wu clan would take them two hours. That was why when Kaslan Lutim proposed that the villages that were further away should send their men to lodge at the village they were learning from, and the teaching village would send their men over in exchange, everyone accepted this plan. This would allow the number of hunters in both villages to remain the same, and it was an efficient way to learn bloodletting and butchering.

“We wanted to seek Donda Wu’s judgment on the matter of the Totos, and since the Lutim house’s men were about to enter the forest, I visited the Wu clan village instead...”

“Papa Donda shouted angrily: [How would I know?], that’s really mean. Ema Min Lutim didn’t do anything wrong.”

Donda Wu must be feeling frustrated nowadays. His meeting with the nobles of Genos would happen in a few days.

They were scheduled to meet on the 23rd of the Blue month, but yesterday the date was postponed to the 30th. The participants weren’t just the three tribal chiefs of Forest’s Edge and Pyschkurewuss, the castle guard commander Malfreed and the *<Guardian>* Kamyua Yost would also be taking part. Kamyua Yost agreed to our proposal and made the arrangements.

According to Kamyua Yost, Pyschkurewuss not only turned a blind eye to the Tsun clan’s transgression of the law, he even assisted them. In order to prove this, Malfreed deceived the denizens of Forest’s Edge and laid a trap for Zattsu Tsun and the others.

If Pyschkurewuss was really that much of a villain, there wasn’t any reason for the Forest’s Edge and Malfreed to become enemies. We should work together against the corrupt Pyschkurewuss instead—I suggested this to Kamyua Yost who was assisting Malfreed.

In order for both sides to work together, Kamyua Yost and the three tribal chiefs held a meeting. A few days ago, he informed me that he told the truth to the three tribal chiefs, so the denizens of Forest's Edge finally know that the enemy wasn't the landlord of Genos, but his representative, Pyschkurewuss.

The tribal chiefs were furious that Malfreed and Kamyua Yost deceived them, but they suppressed their anger. Things wouldn't turn for the better if we don't defeat Pyschkurewuss. Pyschkurewuss was still insisting that "the denizens of Forest's Edge should hand over all members of the entire Tsun clan".

The vicious criminals Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun were already dead. So why was Pyschkurewuss still insisting that we had to deliver them the Tsun clan members? We weren't sure of his reasons, but we couldn't accept his demands. The former tribal chief Zuro Tsun was still waiting for his sentencing in accordance with the laws of Forest's Edge, Diga and Doddo were treated like half-prisoners because of their jailbreak. The other members of the Tsun clan were working hard to live their lives properly.

We need to check of what Malfreed's group said is true. If it's true, we will need to think of a way to expose Pyschkurewuss' past misdeeds, or we wouldn't be able to reach an understanding with the people of Genos.

In other words, when the three tribal chiefs meet with Pyschkurewuss, they would bear the future of Forest's Edge on their shoulders. Hence, it wouldn't be strange for Donda Wu to be so agitated. He couldn't spare the effort to care about a lost Totos.

And so, I finally got the gist of the entire matter.

I only had one question left.

"...So why did you bring the Totos to the Fa house?"

I asked Rimee Wu, and the young Forest's Edge girl shook her head.

"I don't know."

"You don't know, huh... So why did you come here?"

"Rimee doesn't have any more chores, so I came along with Ema Min Lutim. Besides, Rimee hasn't seen Ai Fa for a long time...! Hey, so why did Papa Donda ask you to bring

the Totos to the Fa house?"

Under the gaze of Rimee Wu's bright eyes, Ema Min Lutim started stuttering.

"Well... Erm... Donda Wu told me... After plucking off its feathers, the meat can be eaten. He said that the hearth caretaker of the Fa house will be overjoyed to take on this task."

"Huh? He wants us to eat this Totos?"

I raised my head and looked at the subject's long and thick neck.

The Totos' head was high up in the sky and it tilted it a little.

Its enormous body made its head look really small, but its face was still about the size of a human. Its beak that bent downwards slightly seemed frighteningly huge, but its face looked surprisingly humorous. It had large eyes that were completely black, possessed thin lashes, and looked drowsy like a camel or a giraffe.

"Well, I did butcher a small bird before, but this thing is too big, it will be difficult... From its size alone, it should be larger than a kiba."

I shifted my gaze down the Totos. Rimee Wu was clinging on the Totos again.

She was staring at Ema Min Lutim just now, and she moved her gaze towards me, tears shining in her blue eyes.

"...Do you want to eat this Totos?"

"Huh?"

"Asuta, do you want to eat this Totos?"

She was on the verge of tears.

I turned towards the speechless Ema Min Lutim, who asked me with a sorrowful face: "What should we do?"

This was the so-called dietary education. They had no qualms about eating kiba, so it was illogical to think the Totos was pitiful...! But I had no rights to discuss this with

her anyway.

“Ehh~ It belongs to the people in the city in the first place, so it isn’t appropriate to just eat it. I will contact Kamyua Yost during the Post Station Town’s visit tomorrow and ask him to take in the Totos.”

“That’s true, we should do that.”

Ema Min Lutim sighed, as if a heavy load had been taken off her heart.

But, Rimee Wu was still teary.

“...Do you want to return the Totos to the city?”

“Huh? We can’t raise it in Forest’s Edge, correct? Look how big it is, just feeding it will be very costly.”

“That’s right. Without the permission of the tribal chief, we can’t bring beasts from outside into the Forest’s Edge.”

When she heard what Ema Min Lutim and I said, Rimee Wu’s tears finally fell.

Ema Min Lutim and I looked at each other and sighed deeply.



The next day, 21st of the Blue month.

“Huh? A Totos appeared in Forest’s Edge? How unusual!”

A bit before noon, I saw Kamyua Yost visiting the stall and discussed yesterday’s issue with him immediately.

“Totos won’t starve in the forest. Their running speed on even ground is faster than kiba’s, so it’s no surprise for a couple of Totos to survive... Asuta, what kind of food are you planning to make from the Totos?”

“No, no, I can’t handle something that big. Besides, the denizens of Forest’s Edge aren’t interested in Totos’ meat. I will ask someone to bring it to town tomorrow morning, can you take it in?”

“Hmm~, I will be happy to help if it is troubling you. But a Totos in Forest's Edge... Isn't it boring to just return it to town?”

Kamyua Yost smiled cheerfully.

Even though this man was always smiling, I still needed to pay more attention when he was grinning like this.

“Boring is fine, it would be a problem if the Totos ate the grace of the forest. I want to return it to town as soon as possible.”

“Totos will only eat leaves from tall trees. It can eat any leaves that aren't too tough, and it would never eat bugs or fruits; so it can coexist with kiba.”

“What's the point of them coexisting?”

“Let me put this another way. The Totos can coexist with the denizens of Forest's Edge, correct?”

I didn't get what he was trying to say.

I looked at his long and thin face with dubious eyes, and his smile broadened.

“Well, Totos are convenient, you know? Their meat and eggs are delicious, but civilization wouldn't be so advanced if not for the Totos. They are strong, fast, and docile and rarely lose control. We can use them to tow cargo or as mounts. We just need to tie it to a tree, and it will feed itself. Their lifespan is as long as a human's. Since ancient times, the Totos had been the friends of humanity.”



“You are correct...”

“Well then, let me ask you something. Asuta, how much time does it take to travel from the Sauti clan at the southern edge of Forest's Edge to the Zaza house in the northern end?”

He changed the topic abruptly.

I answered cautiously:

“I heard that if they set off at dawn, they will reach about noon.”

It took about six hours to move from the south end to the north end of Forest's Edge.

“I see. If you learn to ride a Totos, the time would be shortened to a third of that time, or maybe even a quarter. If you learn to make them sprint, you can save even more time.”

“I see...”

“I think it's wonderful for the three clans to take on the role of tribal chiefs at the same time. Letting the two powerful clans at the northern and southern edge act as tribal chiefs in order to watch over every corner of Forest's Edge is a great idea too... However, the Sauti clan and Zaza house tribal chiefs are too far apart, and a one way trip between them would take half a day. Isn't that too tedious? If there is an emergency, it will take quite a bit of effort just to arrange for the tribal chiefs to meet.”

He was right. In order to communicate frequently with Donda Wu, Dali Sauti was now lodging in Lutim house, which wasn't far from the Wu clan.

It would take about two hours to travel from the Wu clan to the Sauti clan and four hours from the Wu clan to the Zaza house. That was the time needed to travel from the Wu clan, which was situated in the center of Forest's Edge, to the north and south ends of the settlement.

“What I'm about to say is just my own opinion. I think how developed a civilization is, depends on how fast information is transferred. Humans developed an incredible civilization just by partnering with Totos. If not for the Totos, it will be hard for the four major kingdoms to liaise with each other. If the denizens of Forest's Edge want to obtain more power and prosperity, you can try harnessing the power of the Totos.”

“Can we learn how to ride a Totos so easily? Besides, I find it hard to imagine Totos running around in Forest's Edge.”

“Normal people will need to spend quite a bit of time before they can ride a Totos. However, the denizens of Forest's Edge can definitely do so easily. With a bit of training, they can definitely master it in a few days.”

Kamyua Yost still had a smile on his face.

“I still need to tell you one other thing. Asuta, there's no evidence that those are the Totos brought by us into Forest's Edge.”

“Huh?”

“We were prepared for all the Totos to get wiped out from the start. To save the trouble, we didn't brand them. Totos that aren't branded don't belong to anyone. Even if they have reins, you can just treat them as wild Totos. Hence, you have no obligation to return that Totos to us. With that in mind, you might want to consider how you want to deal with that Totos.”

“But, erm...”

“During the day, you can just tie it to a tree outside. Let it into the house in the night. You don't need to care too much for it normally, so it's no trouble at all. If you think it is troublesome, you can just slaughter it. Unless it's injured or too old to work, the people in the city won't think of eating them. That's how important a source of labor the Totos are. Just think that you are being conned and try living with it?”

“...You deceived us for tens of days before, and you still dare to say that now...”

“I already apologized plenty of times for the previous incident!”

With the half-eaten [Kiba burger] in hand, Kamyua Yost spread out his arms exaggeratedly. He looked really ostentatious.

“I know, I will think about it carefully. But if my house head or tribal chief objects, I won't defy them, so don't put too much hope in this.”

“I see, I see. Well, once they learn how convenient the Totos are, they won't object to this. Then the denizens of Forest's Edge will obtain even more strength.”

I stared at his pretending to be retarded smile again.

“I don’t think this is likely, but did you predict this might happen and abandoned the Totos in the forest?”

“Ehh? You think too highly of me. The Morga forest is dominated by the kiba, of course I will assume that the Totos will die in such a harsh environment.”

Kamyua Yost showed an untrustworthy expression and a Cheshire cat-like smile.

Part 2

“Welcome home, house head.”

After finishing my work in the Post Station Town for the day, I returned home to work on preparing for the next day. And now, Ai Fa returned alone with a 60 kg kiba.

Ai Fa finally resumed her hunting job yesterday. It had been twenty days since her right shoulder got dislocated. Ai Fa still had a serious expression on her face, but there was a gleam of satisfaction in her eyes now.

After hearing me greet her, Ai Fa narrowed her eyes suspiciously when she turned her head and was about to return the greeting.

I was at the stove behind the house frying the aria I needed to use for tomorrow. The women in the neighborhood were here to observe my work, which was a common sight. However, the sharp Ai Fa immediately noticed the two intruders hidden amongst the women.

They were Rimee Wu and Leito.

“Uwah, amazing! Ai Fa, did you catch that by yourself? And you just recovered too, you are too good!”

Ai Fa probably didn’t mind Rimee Wu’s, who was all smiles, staying here. After all, if Rimee Wu didn’t have any chores, she would want to come to the Fa house to play.

The problem was the boy smiling quietly beside Rimee Wu. Even though Forest’s Edge didn’t have any rules that forbid westerners from entering the Forest’s Edge settlement, this was still rather rare.

“You said you are the disciple of Kamyua Yost, correct? What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to explain how to ride a Totos.”

Ai Fa shut her mouth, hung the kiba’s gigantic body onto a branch some distance away from the stove, and walked to me with a ferocious look.

“Asuta, can you explain what’s going on here?”

“Yes, I will explain it to you now.”

After scooping up the aria into a plate, I relayed my conversation with Kamyua Yost to Ai Fa.

“...That’s how it is. House head, please tell me what your thoughts on this are.”

“Why did you let a westerner enter the Forest’s Edge before consulting me?”

“No, I wanted to get your permission first...”

“Pardon me, Kamyua forced Asuta to take me with him. Kamyua has a lot of work on hand, so I will teach everyone how to ride a Totos.”

After the demise of Zattsu Tsun who was responsible for his parents’ death, Leito was still the same as ever. Or at least, there wasn’t any obvious change.

This smart ten-years-old boy had light brown hair and eyes. Ai Fa glared at the boy’s cheerful face and then turned towards me:

“That man who likes pretending to be retarded has made peace with the tribal chiefs, but this is a different matter. Didn’t Donda Wu instruct us to eat that Totos?”

That Totos was tied to a tree even further away than the kiba and was eating the leaves on the branches leisurely.

“Since we found a better way than eating it, I want to propose it to the tribal chiefs. If Donda Wu remains unmoved after hearing my proposal, I will follow his instructions... However, Donda Wu just wanted to push this troublesome matter to the Fa house in the first place, so we don’t really need to do as he says.”

Ai Fa fell silent with a stern face.

She was furious with Donda Wu’s brute way of doing things yesterday too and grumbled: “This beast looks like it might taste nasty, who will want to eat that?”

After that, Rimee, who had been listening to us quietly, walked over and tugged at the cloth on Ai Fa’s waist:

“...Ai Fa, do you want to eat this Totos?”

And so, Ai Fa gave in.

A single tear speaks more than a thousand words... I didn't know if such a proverb existed, but Ai Fa couldn't continue to object while facing the teary Rimee Wu.

“...So what do you want to do?”

After Rimee Wu stopped sobbing, Ai Fa glared at me with a hellish expression.

“I want to check how much work is needed to ride a Totos. No matter how convenient a Totos is, the denizens of Forest's Edge can't waste too much effort on unnecessary work.”

“...Who will ride it?”

“I want to try.” “No.”

“Then, let Rimee try!” “No.”

Even Rimee Wu was caught in Ai Fa's refusal.

With a sigh, Ai Fa ruffled her blonde hair in resignation.

“...I understand. I will do it.”

Facing Ai Fa who was getting less happy with each passing moment, Leito said with a smile:

“This Totos seems really docile and probably won't shake you off. If we don't do anything violent, there won't be any danger.”

And so, we stopped our work for now and held a Totos riding trial.

Leito held the reins of the Totos, and everyone gathered at the entrance of the house. The six women taking a break from their work looked happily at each other and followed us. They were Rii Sudora, Jass Dean, Tulu Dean, and women from the Fou and Von houses whom I couldn't recall the names of.

“Aside from sleeping or laying eggs, Totos almost never squats down. If you force it to squat, it will spoil its mood. Normally, we will mount onto its back while it is standing.”

After reaching the road before the house, Leito started to explain.

“The mounting position is between the center and rear of the Totos’ back. When stopping suddenly, take care not to grab its neck when you are leaning forward. That might spook the Totos and make it go on a rampage... Erm, is there anything that can be used as a step ladder?”

“There’s no need for that.”

With that, Ai Fa placed her hands on the back of the Totos and then leaped onto it nimbly.

The Totos was three meters tall, with its neck accounting for half its height, but its body was still 150 cm tall, which was about the height of a person. But Ai Fa could jump onto its back so easily, a testament of the amazing physical prowess of a hunter from Forest's Edge.

“Uwah!”

Rimee Wu cheered, and the other women also started chattering. The way Ai Fa looked with her head and chest held high on the Totos impressed me so much that I didn’t even feel jealous.

“Please squeeze the Totos a little with your knees. Don’t use too much force or it will be painful for it.”

Ai Fa moved her slender legs a little.

The Totos didn’t move at all.

“The Totos was stationary earlier because I was holding its reins. But it keeps standing still now because you are clamping its body. I will let go of the reins now, please don’t relax the force in your legs.”

Leito slowly let go of the reins.

Both the Totos and Ai Fa didn’t move.

“Next, please hold the reins and pull both ends tight. The length of both sides needs to be equal.”

Leito handed the reins to Ai Fa who was mounted on a horse... no, mounted on a bird.

Ai Fa followed the instructions quietly, and Leito checked the angle and tautness of the reins from both sides.

“There’s no problem, don’t use too much force in your arms, and bend your elbows adequately... It seems that I don’t need to nag to you about all that. It’s a bit late to ask this, but is this your first time riding a Totos?”

“Of course. There’s no way a denizen of Forest’s Edge will ride this thing.”

“I asked because your posture is too perfect. Well then, please keep your back straight after the Totos starts walking... If you want to stop the Totos, assume your current posture. We will let the Totos walk later; when you are getting ready to stop, pull the reins towards yourself and clamp the body of the Totos tightly. It’s dangerous to stop suddenly; please be gentle and avoid startling the Totos.”

“Yes.”

“Alright then, let’s make it walk forward. Please relax the strength in your legs and then pull the reins down. It will then start walking.”

“Uwah!”

Rimee Wu shouted again.

Totos opened its strides obediently and kept advancing steadily.

But it was twice as fast as a person because of its long legs. We chased after it quickly, and the Totos stopped five meters away.

“Yes, it stopped obediently.”

“It did. Alright then, let me teach you how to change directions. Even if you hold the reins loosely, the Totos will still walk along the road. However, if you want to head to the left or right, you can pull the reins in that directions and change the way that the Totos’ neck is facing. There’s no need to pull too hard, please avoid startling the Totos.”

The Totos started moving again.

I couldn't see Ai Fa's arms from my position. But the Totos veered about 50 degrees every three meters, resembling a Z-shape path.

"Hah~, the Totos is really obedient."

I sighed, and Leito smiled awkwardly:

"Yes, it's performing a little too well. Ai Fa, if you move the reins smoothly, I think you can go in the opposite direction. You want to give it a try?"

As Leito was saying that, the Totos turned around after moving in a large circle.

It then continued to zig-zag until it reached the house entrance where it set off from and stopped. Its movement was smooth and accurate as a machine.

"Amazing, amazing! That's so nice, Rimee wants to try!"

"...This is no different from walking by myself. Why do I need to train like this? Besides, I have never seen anyone ride a Totos in town."

"It's dangerous to run wildly on a Totos in town, so that is prohibited. But everyone will ride on Totos to travel between cities... Well then, let's make it run a little."

To make a Totos sprint, you just had to kick its leg.

"Don't make it dash right away. Wait for it to open its strides and then slowly kick it. If you increase the strength of your kicks, its speed will increase further."

"Hmmp."

Ai Fa grunted disinterestedly and made the Totos walk.

We didn't follow and stayed by the roadside. The roads in Forest's Edge were only 5 meters wide, which was half that of stone-paved roads.

The figure of Ai Fa and the Totos went further away as its pace increased.

When the speed was so fast that it was starting to worry observers like us, they made an arc in the path and disappeared.

Less than ten seconds later, they appeared from the shadow of the woods again and sprinted quickly towards us.

The Totos' speed should be around 50 km/h. From what I knew, that was as fast as a motorcycle

The Totos' powerful legs struck the ground, and Ai Fa lowered her stance like a jockey. When she passed us by, her cape was fluttering in the air... The Totos then gradually slowed down, turned its head around quickly, and walked towards us in large strides.

“A... Amazing! Ai Fa is so cool!”

Rimee Wu cheered again.

Excited squeals drowned out her voice.

I turned back in shock and found the younger four of the six women cheering with sparkly eyes just like Rimee Wu.

By the way, the spouse of the Sudora house head, Rii Sudora, was one of the four younger ones. Unlike her usual elegant self, she was holding the hands of a girl beside her and showing a face like a girl in love, which was a rare sight.

The two older women were Jass Dean and a middle-aged woman from the Fou house. They also sighed in awe.

“Incredible. Everything is done perfectly, I have nothing more to teach.”

Leito stood amongst the crowd with a wry smile.

“As the saying goes: [Fall off the back of the Totos ten times, and you can be a masterful Totos rider.] But you can ride the Totos so nimbly without even falling once. To be honest, not even the people in the city are as skilled as you. The hunters in Forest's Edge are really impressive.”

“...Learning tricks like this is nothing to be proud of.”

Ai Fa kept a straight face as she got down from the Totos nimbly.

Leito let out an “Ah.”, but Ai Fa grabbed the reins tightly at the same time, so the Totos

remained immobile.

Leito smiled awkwardly again and shrugged magnanimously.

“What do you think? A lot of time can be saved when the denizens move between the two ends of Forest's Edge, correct? Furthermore, this proves that the hunters of Forest's Edge can ride a Totos easily. Do you understand why Kamyua said that: [Aside from eating it, there is a more efficient way of using it.]?”

“Yes...”

Ai Fa still looked troubled.

I glanced at her and probed: “Can I try?”

“No.” “Give it up!” “It's better that you don't.”

I received three replies the very next instant.

“What if you get injured because of this?”

“That's right, it's dangerous if you fall.”

“If you are interested, just practice a little every day.”

They coordinated their replies perfectly.

“I see. I understand what everyone thinks of my physical capabilities. But do all of you really think I will fall off a Totos?”

They responded with silence.

And it was really unbearable during times like this.

“...I understand. Then let me start by practicing every day. Please.”

“Why are you so adamant about this? There's no point in you learning to ride a Totos, right?”

“Seeing how good Ai Fa feels when you are riding a Totos will obviously pique my

interest.”

“...”

“Right? Ai Fa, you felt really good, correct?”

“...”

“Huh? Did I say something wrong?”

“Shut up!”

It was rare seeing her kick me.

“The tribal chief has not agreed to take this Totos in yet! We can’t act recklessly before they permit it!”

“That hurts. Why are you so angry...? But if the tribal chiefs are still uninterested in the Totos after hearing our suggestions, I want to keep it in the Fa house. The tribal chief wants us to eat it anyway, so they won’t have any complaints whatever we do with it.”

“What? Why would you want to take this thing in?”

“Kamyua is right, it is really convenient. If we buy a wagon, transporting ingredients and crockeries will be a piece of cake. It should be able to pull a wagon easily.”

When she heard me saying that, Ai Fa finally started considering it.

“I see... So it can be used in such a way too.”

“That’s right. The path we usually take has a suspension bridge, so we will make a detour now. And I remember the wagons in the city can transport both cargo and people. Isn’t that right, Leito?”

“Indeed, normal wagons are pulled by two Totos, but if you spend some time searching, you can also find small wagons that can be pulled by one. You won’t need to worry about falling off a Totos then.”

Ai Fa started considering it seriously.

“Huh!?”

Rimee Wu gasped loudly.

When I heard the hint of happiness in her gasp, I felt a little uneasy. I turned to find an incredible scene. Two women from the Forest's Edge were pulling three mounts, no, three Totos with them as they approached from the south.

Ema Min Lutim was holding the reins of two Totos, while Molun Lutim held the third. With the pair of huge followers behind her, Ema Min Lutim walked towards us quietly and bowed apologetically:

“I'm sorry, the men of the Sauti clan found more Totos in the woods...”

“Uwah~!”

Rimee Wu cheered excitedly, I let out a deep sigh, and Ai Fa scowled her brows angrily.

The Totos were unaware of the emotions of the people and started chewing on the leaves at the edge of the forest.

Part 3

In the end, Forest's Edge decided to take in these four Totos.

There weren't any major issues. Anyway, after witnessing the Wu clan's forceful pushing of the four Totos to the Fa house, Ai Fa was enraged. She went to the Wu clan village to demonstrate the convenience of the Totos personally, which was warmly received by one of the three tribal chiefs, Dali Sauti.

"It will be much easier to head to the northern villages! Not just that, the denizens in the northern and southern ends of the settlement can now easily head into the Post Station Town in Genos to make procurements."

After inquiring about it, I learned that the villages to the north and south ends of the settlement would only head to the Post Station Town to buy things for banquets and celebrations.

The reason was simple, it was too far.

The Forest's Edge settlement was a long and narrow place that stretched from the north to the south. For the Wu clan and Fa house situated in the center, the Post Station Town was just an hour's journey away. But for the Zaza house and Sauti clan, it was a four-hour trip.

Hence, they purchased aria and poitan directly from the farmers that were closer to them. If they needed to procure rock salt or fruit wine, they would pay in advance to the farmers along with a small commission and buy them in large quantities to store in their homes.

When Dali Sauti heard that the Totos could traverse the two ends of Forest's Edge in 90 minutes, it must have sounded very attractive. During all this time, the house heads who were scattered far apart within the settlement could only gather once a year for the house head conference... After the incident with the Tsun clan, we couldn't do so anymore. Like what Kamyua Yost said, it was important for the tribal chiefs to communicate frequently, which would affect the future of Forest's Edge greatly.

"We were the ones who found these Totos, but we didn't notice their capabilities, what a disgrace. Forest's Edge needs the Totos. The head of the Zaza house will definitely agree with me."

I learned about this from Ai Fa. Dali Sauti was sincerely awed by the prowess of the Totos. Ai Fa grumbled that despite Dali Sauti acting all cool and composed, his eyes were sparkling just like Rimee Wu.

“...We are in Kamyua Yost’s debt now, which irks me. Tell him that I will pay for the Totos.”

Ai Fa asked me to convey her message to him.

And of course, Kamyua Yost turned down the offer.

“The Forest’s Edge will be holding a meeting with Genos in the near future. I hope you can accept the Totos and forget all owed debts and favors. But if the meeting doesn’t end peacefully, you can just give me some copper plates or return the Totos to me.”

The denizens of Forest’s Edge seemed to prefer such crude suggestion.

And so, Dali Sauti personally rode to the northern village on a Totos and got Graff Zaza to agree to this. The four Totos were welcomed to the settlement by the denizens of Forest’s Edge.

The decision was made in just four days, which was incredibly fast for the conservative denizens of Forest’s Edge.

Since two of the tribal chiefs gave their consent, Donda Wu didn’t make any protest. I didn’t know how much effect Rimee Wu’s pleading had on him.

By the way, the three tribal chiefs and the Fa house were each given a Totos.

As the Fa house was financially capable of purchasing a Totos ourselves, we would like to entrust all four Totos to the tribal chiefs if possible. But everyone thought that the Fa house made a big contribution to Forest’s Edge by uncovering the convenience of the Totos, so the first Totos found by the Sauti clan was left with the Fa house.

“I will look around for a place to buy wagons tomorrow.”

On the 23rd of the Blue month, we accepted Kamyua Yost’s suggestion and officially recognized the Totos as the possession of Forest’s Edge. I reported this to Ai Fa on that very night.

After having dinner, I worked hard on preparing the ingredients for tomorrow, and Ai Fa sat some distance away from me at the entrance.

The Totos was lying beside Ai Fa. It bent its large legs and stretched its long neck onto the ground. Munto and Gizu would wander around the settlement at night, so we had to let the Totos in when it got dark.

“I see.”

Ai Fa muttered softly as she looked down at the Totos’ sleeping face.

“Never mind, we don’t have other places to spend the copper plates anyway, this works out just fine. We can be liberated from our daily heavy labors now, which is a good deal.”

This was the 26th day since I started my business in the Post Station Town. The Fa house’s wealth was now over 3,000 copper plates. That would just be three silver plates, but it was an incredible amount of wealth for Forest’s Edge.

“Do what you want... But don’t be reckless before you complete your training.”

“Alright. The road leading into the Post Station Town is narrow and hilly anyway. I will practice on a flat road first.”

“Yes.”

“Erm... Are you angry?”

Seeing that Ai Fa was a little slow in her reactions, I asked her worriedly. Ai Fa tilted her head puzzlingly and asked:

“Why would I be angry? It’s good that the tribal chiefs didn’t object. I’m just afraid of the relationship between Forest’s Edge and Genos deteriorating further.”

Ai Fa looked really cheerful when she rode the Totos. She had a happy expression when she galloped on a Totos, and now, she showed a calm face as she watched the Totos sleep.

Besides, the Totos were a good match for the denizens of Forest’s Edge. If not for that, the Totos wouldn’t be accepted so easily into the Forest’s Edge, since they weren’t so

receptive to other cultures. Anyway, Ai Fa looked really cool on the back of a Totos and didn't seem out of place at all.

We didn't know where the denizens of Forest's Edge originated from, but their ancestors might have galloped around the plains on Totos before they settled down in the forest. Such a thought occurred to me because of how natural Ai Fa looked when she was riding a Totos. I felt really happy seeing Ai Fa looking at the sleeping face of the animal.



“Well then, what name are we going to pick for it?”

“Name? The Totos is just the Totos.”

“But there are four Totos in Forest's Edge. If we don't name it, there might be times when we confuse it for another?”

“Are you going to treat it like a person and name it?”

Ai Fa turned to me in surprise.

I taste-tested the tarapa sauce and tilted my head quizzingly:

“Why are you so surprised? Since we will be living together, that means it will be a part of our family. It's easier for us to grow attached if it has a name, and we can become of one body and soul.”

“Soul...”

Ai Fa looked at the Totos' sleeping face again.

“So beasts have a soul too. When I pulled at its reins and kicked its abdomen, it did move more docilely than a human.”

“Yes, that's why people call them the friends of humanity.”

“It might be easier for me to get along with them, compared to other people.”

“The way you put that sounds wrong.”

“I even thought about putting reins on you too.”

“I'm a human, you can just tell me with words!”

“...Totos sure are incredible creatures.”

Even though Ai Fa said many inappropriate things, she was showing a thoughtful expression right now.

The sauce in the pot was finally done. I covered it with a lid, put out the fire, washed

my hands and then walked to Ai Fa.

“So, what about its name? I don’t know which name is suitable, I hope you can name it.”

Ai Fa was quiet for a moment and then said quietly:

“Gilla.”

“Gilla, huh, that’s a nice name.”

I felt surprised as I answered.

I recalled that Ai Fa’s father who passed away two years ago was named Gill Fa.

“...Is that named after your father?”

“Yes. If I have a boy, he hoped that I could name him this.”

I sat down quietly beside Ai Fa.

“But when I decided to live on as a hunter, I couldn’t become a mother. That’s why I want to give it this name... What do you think?”

I closed my eyes and sought the answer I could accept in my heart.

It wasn’t difficult, and I found my answer immediately.

“In that case, I think you should give it another name. There are no guarantees in this world, maybe you will want to have a child in the future, Ai Fa.”

She might beat me up— I already steeled myself for that.

However, Ai Fa just said quietly:

“I see. Then call it Gilulu. Gilulu Fa sounds nice, right? I can’t give it our family name though. Never mind, let’s leave it at that.”

“...”

“You are not happy about that?”

Ai Fa slowly turned and faced me.

I looked into her clear blue eyes and replied:

“No... I think that is a great name, it sounds cute and suits it well.”

“Is that so?”

Ai Fa said and smiled happily.

And so, the Fa house welcomed a new housemate named Gilulu.

Chapter 2

Thirteen Birthday Celebration

Part 1

One day after welcoming our new housemate, the Totos Gilulu...

I was working hard at my stall today too. At this moment, Leina Wu from the Wu clan main house appeared in the Post Station Town. She was in town to procure groceries.

There wasn't anything strange about that, but Leina Wu had a troubled look as she said to me quietly:

"Asuta, can you spare a bit of time for me?"

She seemed distracted. Shela Wu who was tending to the [Myam-roasted meat] stall with me tilted her head puzzlingly too.

"No, erm... I need to go and work at the inn later..."

It was almost noon, and the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> requested me to cater dinner for them since four days ago. My working hours were becoming hectic.

"It won't take too much time. Please."

Leina Wu's face still had a hint of childishness, and she looked at me with a sincere gleam in her blue eyes.

"...I understand. Shela Wu, can you tend to the stall for a while alone?"

"Alright. Rii Sudora will be coming soon, we'll be fine."

Under Shela Wu's worried gaze, we went to the woods behind us.

"Sorry for disturbing your work..."

“That’s alright. What’s the matter?”

It had been a while since I last met Leina Wu. Our last meeting was the night when Zattsu Tsun was apprehended by the people from the city. That was nine days ago. Recently, Vena Wu and Lala Wu who visited the Post Station Town frequently helped the Wu clan procure their ingredients, so the Wu clan seldom visited the town just to buy groceries.

Leina Wu was a girl who was seventeen just like me. Her hair was raven black, which rarely occurred for denizens of Forest's Edge, and it was tied into low ponytails. Her appearance was charming and cute; and, despite her petite stature, her thicc figure was a match for her elder sister.

She had kind and gentle personality, possessed great culinary skills amongst the denizens of Forest's Edge. She was a girl who stood out in all areas... But I still found it hard to gauge the appropriate distance between us.

“Just the thought of telling you this pains my heart... But I can’t suppress my emotions. Can you accede to my request...?”

“T-That will depend on what you are asking for.”

Leina Wu was petite and didn’t even reach my jaw, and she was looking up at me desperately. Our bodies weren’t touching, but we were so close that I could feel her breath.

“Actually...”

“Y-Yes?”

“...Tomorrow is Lala’s birthday...”

“Huh?”

“Tomorrow is Lala’s thirteenth birthday. And... I hope you can prepare a dish for her... Is that okay?”

Leina Wu’s eyes looked troubled again.

“Oh~”

I was still confused and made a funny sound.

“Dish, huh. How many portions?”

“Twelve portions for the main house. We will prepare the poitan and soup; Asuta, I hope you can prepare a meat dish... It’s not possible after all, right?”

“Not really. Since it’s Lala’s birthday, I will accept this request.”

When she heard me acceding to her proposal, Leina Wu opened her eyes wide.

“I-Is it really fine? Not only you need to run your business at the stall, you also have to cater dinner for the inns. And recently, you decided to take care of the Totos too, right?”

“I will finish my work at the inn in the afternoon. The additional work I need to do at home won’t increase by too much. The Totos don’t need any special attention. If I can perform the preparation in the Wu clan stove room like last time, helping out once will be fine.”

“Really? Thank you...”

Leina Wu clasped her hands before her chest and sighed deeply in deep relief.

“Y-You are exaggerating too much, it’s not that big a deal.”

“Ehh? No, I just heard that you were very busy recently, so I thought you would turn me down. Lala will be so happy about this.”

Leina Wu smiled brightly.

Seeing her care for her family warmed my heart, but there was still a shred of doubt in my mind.

In other words, I was suspecting that Leina Wu might have ulterior motives.

No, I’m just overthinking it.

Leina Wu looked really sincere as she stood with a smile in front of me. She wasn’t a girl who would use her younger sister’s birthday for her own benefits. I reflected on my shallow thinking.

“Well then, do you need any special ingredients? If so, I can buy them today.”

We were some distance away from the stall, so it was impossible for Lala Wu to hear us. But Leina Wu still straightened her back and moved her mouth near my ears.

“N-No need, I just heard about this and haven’t decided on the dish yet... Besides, it’s too late to lower our voices now, right?”

“Ah, that’s true. Sorry, I got too excited.”

Leina Wu pulled away bashfully and appeared really squirmish.

I wanted to believe that she didn’t do that on purpose.

“You might think this is childish, but can you keep it a secret from Lala? I think she will be happier if it is a surprise.”

“That’s Okay. But wouldn’t the whole matter be exposed if she saw me going to the Wu clan village?”

“You just need to tell her that you want to discuss business matters with Mama Mia Lei, and it would be fine. I also got permission from Papa Donda.”

“I see... By the way, can I mention this to Vena Wu and the others?”

“Of course, but please tell them to keep it a secret.”

“Ah, you mentioned that I should prepare twelve portions, correct? What about Mida? If he is there, I would need to prepare twice that amount, right?”

“No. Coincidentally, Mida is dining at Shin Wu’s house since yesterday. Besides, Mama Mia Lei restricts him to five portions for a meal.”

I see, so Mama Mia Lei is limiting Mida’s food intake. What a wise decision... But even with the restrictions, he would still be eating five people’s worth of food.

Leaving that aside, what else did I need to check? After thinking it through carefully, I realized I forgot something important.

“By the way, I can’t let my house head watch the house alone, can Ai Fa dine with us

too?"

A different light of sadness appeared in Leina Wu's eyes.

"Of course. Asuta, you have never spent the night in a different place than Ai Fa before, correct?"

Nope.

We spent a lot of time apart in the day, but during the 60 days we have lived together, we dined and slept together.

"Well then, please send my regards to Ai Fa. Sorry for disturbing your work."

Leina Wu left with a cheerful smile on her face.



"I see. Celebrating the birthday of the Wu clan's third daughter, huh. I'm fine with that."

Ai Fa accepted without any hesitation as she waited for me to prepare dinner.

"Let me check with you first. Even if they are the Wu clan, they won't hold a grand birthday party, right?"

"Yes, it will be something like the pre-wedding banquet. Luxurious meals will be served, but the participants are usually just their family members."

That might be so, but from past experiences, "luxurious meal" in Forest's Edge was just a kiba pot with more vegetables than usual.

"Leina Wu and the others would be preparing their specialty, the meat soup, so they asked me to make just the meat dish. So there won't be too much burden on me."

"I see. What dish are you going to serve?"

"Sorry, but this dish might not be new to you. I plan to use that ingredient I got from the innkeeper of the <Cryptic Venerable Inn>."

That ingredient was rarer and more expensive than the Tau sauce I bought in the <Big

Tree of the South Inn>, my cherished store of ingredients.

“...So you want to use that.”

Ai Fa pouted a little. She loved that ingredient.

“Well, you know, it’s a rare occasion after all. When the Semu traveling merchants visit again, I will buy a great amount of it from them... So don’t pout.”

“Who’s pouting...! How old will the third daughter of the Wu clan be tomorrow?”

“I heard she will be thirteen.”

“Thirteen, huh. Boys start to learn hunting at that age.”

“Hmm~. What about the girls?”

“The girls learn about being a bride before fifteen... My mother Mei passed away when I was thirteen, so I don’t really know either.”

“...I see.”

I drooped my brows a little, and, in the next instant, Ai Fa glared at me with dangerous eyes.

“What? You lost your mother ten years ago, so there’s no reason for you to pity me, right? So stop worrying about unnecessary things and do your job as a hearth caretaker.”

“Pouting one moment and raging the next, you sure are busy.”

“I’m not pouting, and I’m not angry!”

Ai Fa remained seated as she stamped her feet.

It might not be nice to describe her this way, but she was really too darn cute. Thanks to her, the atmosphere didn’t turn sentimental.

“Ah, I also heard that everyone will gift a flower to the birthday girl.”

“...You think I don’t even know that?”

“I want to check with you just to be sure. I thought the customs of each house will be different... Ah, we will be returning to the Fa house after dinner, right?”

“Yes, I don’t want to intrude on the Wu clan either.”

“Alright then, I will head straight to the Wu clan village after closing the stall, please take care of Gilulu.”

“Take care of Gilulu?”

“Yes, both of us will be away from the house, so you will have to let Gilulu in before leaving.”

Gilulu was also tied to the entrance today too, and it was laying its long neck on the floor. Ai Fa looked at its relaxed sleeping figure and then looked at me in surprise.

“Asuta, if we won’t make use of Gilulu, when do you want to do so?”

“Ehh? But it will be dark during our return trip, and there are two of us... Ah, we can just lead it back by pulling its reins.”

“What do you mean? We can ride Gilulu on the return trip.”

“I-It’s dark at night, so riding a Totos will be dangerous. The candle stand will be blown out too.”

“There’s no need for a candle stand. Gilulu just needs to run a little, and the Munto and Gizu won’t be able to catch us.”

“But Gilulu might have poor night vision. In my old world, we call night blindness ‘birds eye’.”

“Oh? Totos have poor night vision? Even so, I can see in the moonlight. If the moon is covered, we will have to dismount and walk. So I should still prepare a candle stand.”

Does the candle stand only serve to repel wild beasts? I felt once again how powerful the denizens of Forest's Edge were.

“...Then there is only one thing that worries me. I haven’t tried riding a Totos before.”

“I will hold the reins, so it will be fine. You just need to hold on to me tightly, and you won’t fall off.”

I remembered Leito saying that a Totos can be ridden by two riders. But, could I really hold on tightly to the young and thicc body of Ai Fa?

“Let’s practice after dinner. I heard that it feels really good.”

Seeing Ai Fa saying that with an excited smile made it hard for me to turn her down.

“...So, is dinner not ready yet? I’m very hungry.”

“Yes, I just need to grill the meat, so hold on a little more. I made teriyaki roast meat with Tau sauce.”

“Alright.”

When dinner wasn’t hamburg steak, Ai Fa reacted plainly. She didn’t show any unhappiness; she wouldn’t express great joy either. Ai Fa had not encountered any dish that mesmerized her more than hamburg steak, and the new ingredient I got from the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> only complemented the hamburg steak.

“Speaking of which, I have known you for almost two months, so it’s only natural that someone in the Wu clan will be celebrating her birthday.”

“Hmm? I don’t get what you’re saying?”

“I mean, there are thirteen members in the Wu clan main house, including Kota Wu, correct? In that case, it won’t be strange for someone to have a birthday every month. There are twelve months in this world too.”

<EN: Analysis of https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birthday_problem shows that in case of 13 people and 13 months, more probable is a situation when several birthdays occur in the same month; consequently, some months should have no birthdays.>

However, there would be a thirteenth month every three years, and I still didn’t really understand how the calendar year worked here.

“You are weird. We are not kins of the Wu clan, they celebrating a birthday has nothing to do with us.”

“You aren’t wrong.”

“And it’s incorrect to say it has been almost two months.”

“Huh? It’s not too far off, right? I didn’t really keep track of how many days I have been here, but it should be around 60 days.”

After hearing my answer, Ai Fa rested her arm on her knee that was propped up and leaned her cheek on it.

“It’s not almost two months, tonight is exactly two months.”

“Ehh?”

“I met you in the forest on the 24th of the Yellow month. Today is the 24th of the Blue month, so it has been exactly two months.”

I was speechless.

Ai Fa’s eyes seemed to be looking far away.

“Two months ago during this time... I was cooking soup, right? You were wearing strange white foreign clothes and looked at the kiba meat that wasn’t bloodlet with sparkling eyes. You also said that it looked delicious.”

On the same day, when I first met Ai Fa in the forest, she pointed a blade at my nose and brought me to the Fa house... Two whole months had passed after that incident.

Be it two months or one month ago, I had been living without knowing what date it was. After I started my business in the Post Station Town, I became aware of the existence of dates, which led me to be taken by surprise right now.

“...We are not having teriyaki roast meat with Tau sauce tonight! We will have hamburg steak!”

“Ehh? Why are you changing the dish so suddenly?”

“It’s our two months anniversary, so we should celebrate it! Oh, I will use that ingredient, let’s splurge a little tonight!”

“It’s just two short months, what is there to celebrate? Besides, if you only start mincing the meat now, I can only eat dinner even later.”

“I have the meat patty for my business! And I can make more after dinner! The meat patty is small, so we can have two each.”

Seeing me standing up with a start and walking to the food store, Ai Fa looked up at me in shock.

“I don’t understand. Asuta, why are you so worked up?”

“Huh? I’m not worked up... On such a day, I want to cook your favorite dish for dinner. Is there anything you want to eat beside hamburg steak? I can make anything you want.”

“...I will only want to eat hamburg steak, of course.”

Ai Fa showed a complicated face, as if not being sure whether she should pout.

And so, before celebrating Lala Wu’s birthday, the Fa house held a mini party.

Part 2

The next day, 25th of the Blue month.

I headed to the Wu clan village from the Post Station Town as planned and saw a strange scene.

“Uwah, what is that?”

In a corner of the Wu clan village plaza surrounded by seven houses, there was a strange pile of meat on the ground.

The small hill of meat was covered in clothes with swirly patterns, and young children were playing noisily around it. As I stood stumped on the spot, Lala Wu answered in the stead of the Wu clan women:

“It’s Mida, of course. What else could it be?”

I could tell it was him at first glance but didn’t get why he was collapsed in such a place. I continued walking forward with Lala Wu and the others until I could see what was actually going on, but I was still confused.

Mida laid sprawled on the ground covered in sweat and was panting hard while making wheezing sounds. His round belly rose and fell with his breathing, and the kids were trying to balance themselves at the peak of the squirming meat pile. Some squealed happily as they grabbed the meat pile, while others attempted to scale Mida’s belly, turning it into some sort of game.

There were five kids, three boys and two girls. They were all under the age of ten and dressed like children. The youngest girl looked like she was three.

“Erm... Are they tormenting him?”

“Does it looks like torment?”

“I don’t know either.”

At least the kids didn’t have any ill will in their smiles.

Mida was like a beached sperm whale, and I couldn't tell whether he was conscious.

At this moment, a man walked towards Mida from the shade of a house.

"House member Mida, that's enough rest. Let's continue working."

He was an unfamiliar man.

He was almost 40 years old, had a slender build, and wore a mustache above his lips. He got his long dark-brown hair tied behind his head, his dark-blue eyes were narrow like a Semu, and his face was long, sharp, and firm. He seemed to be a mature and dependable man.

"Water... Mida wants to drink water...?"

"Then draw the water yourself. You are the one who drank all the water from the flask in the first place."

He wasn't holding back with his stern and heartless voice.

Mida slowly propped up his upper body, and the kids climbing on his abdomen jumped off with happy screams.

"Uwahhh!"

At this moment I let out a cry that wasn't happy at all. Because I felt something soft suddenly pressing onto my back.

"Sorry... I didn't mean to do that... I just feel very uncomfortable..."

I wanted to protest when I felt the dangerous sensation on my back, but I found a pale Vena Wu when I looked over my shoulder. She couldn't stand Mida at all.

"...Shela, you are back. Women of the Wu clan main house, thank you for your hard work."

The middle-aged man shifted his gaze from Mida towards us.

At this point, I suddenly realized it. This man was Shela Wu's and Shin Wu's father, the former head of a branch house Ryada Wu.

On a closer look, he seemed to be dragging his right leg and couldn't walk properly. The men were supposed to be in the woods now, but he wasn't in hunter's garb nor wearing any saber at his waist. The nerves of his leg got severed, so he couldn't complete his work as a hunter and passed his position as head to his young eldest son, Shin Wu. He was also the youngest brother of Donda Wu— Ryada Wu.

Vena Wu was still sticking on to me like a ghost, but I still bowed as much as I could.

"Ryada Wu, nice to meet you... Did I get the right person? I'm Asuta of the Fa house."

I was the only one with such pale skin in Forest's Edge, so I probably didn't need to introduce myself.

But the Shin Wu house had helped me previously, so I wanted to treat their former house head as politely as possible.

"This is indeed the first time we meet. I'm the former house head of Shin Wu's house, Ryada Wu. My daughter Shela has been in your care."

He seemed to think the same way and acknowledged me quietly with a nod. The air about him resembled Shin Wu and Shela Wu a little.

"What kind of work is Mida doing?"

"Hmm? He is going to gather lumber from the forest."

Ryada Wu tilted his head puzzledly. I followed his gaze and saw a huge pile of lumber behind Shin Wu's house. They were thicker than the ones we usually foraged, and the cuts were more obvious.

"Instead of hunting, he is gathering lumber?"

"Yes, he is strong but goes limp like this very quickly. He will just hold the other hunters back like this, so we let him handle other work for now."

As I was speaking with Ryada Wu, Mida finally noticed our presence. Surrounded by smiling children, Mida remained lying on the ground and said in an unusually high-pitched voice:

"Huh...? It's Asuta... You... came...?"

“Yes, Mida, it’s been a while since we last met.”

The next moment, Lala Wu retorted:

“Why are you being so polite to him? He is younger than Ludo, you know? From today onwards, he will just be one year apart from me.”

“But...”

I thought about it again mid-sentence. He was three years younger than me, so it would feel really distant if I was too polite.

“...Mida, I thought you were older than me in the beginning because of your large body. I will talk to you normally now.”

“...Hmm...?”

Mida’s cheeks trembled a little, he didn’t seem to understand my words.

He then breathed out heavily.

“Ah... After Mida sees you, Mida feels hungry... Mida wants to eat tasty food...”

He was the same as ever.

Nine days ago, when he saw Tay Tsun’s corpse, he was so sad, as if it was the end of the world. No matter how Ai Fa and Yamiel Lei consoled him, his tears wouldn’t stop... Fortunately, the gloom from back then had faded away.

“There’s still some time before dinner, so work hard for the sake of eating a delicious meal, alright?”

A gentle voice encouraged him. It was Shela Wu.

I was surprised, and, when I turned to look, I found Shela Wu looking at me with her eyes wide open.

“What’s the matter? Did I say anything strange?”

“Ah, sorry. I had never heard you speak in such a tone before... You sounded just like a

big sister.”

“...I don’t get what you mean, but it feels a little embarrassing.”

Shela Wu lowered her head awkwardly.

After being looked at with Lala Wu’s icy gaze, I scratched my head and broke into a cold sweat when I saw Ryada Wu looking at me.

“No, erm... Sorry.”

“...I don’t know why you are apologizing, but we have to get back to work.”

Ryada Wu looked at the kids around Mida with a stern face.

“If you don’t have any chores, go play somewhere else. Don’t go near Mida when he is working, got it?”

“Yes~”

“Mida, bye bye!”

“Mida, let’s play together again!”

“Yes...”

Mida’s cheeks started to tremble.

I couldn’t read his thoughts from his face, but his piglet-like eyes seemed to have a gleam of regret.

In that case, he wasn’t being bullied. I could rest easy and bade Mida farewell.

“Bye, Mida, let’s both work hard.”

“Ehh... Asuta, you are going back...?”

“No, I will be dining in the main house tonight. If there is time, let’s chat more.”

“Yes... Mida understands...”

And so, we left Mida who was getting up slowly and moved on.

Even though it was our intention, since Shela Wu and Lala Wu were carrying the pot from Shin Wu's house, so they walked there, while I had to bring the wobbly Vena Wu to the Wu clan main house.

"Mida has moved into the Wu clan village over ten days ago. You still can't get over your queasy feeling?"

"I don't get why everyone can act so normally... Ugghhh, how disgusting..."

"If Mida works hard, he will be like a normal person in the future... No, that's really difficult. Maybe he can become Donda Wu's size."

"...Can my heart hold out until that time comes...?"

As we were talking, we reached the Wu clan main house.

I greeted Sati Lei Wu who was watching the house and then headed to the stove room behind. When I was turning around the corner, I ran into Rimee Wu. More specifically, Rimee Wu who was riding a Totos.

"Ah, Asuta! Welcome! Welcome to the Wu clan!"

I had started living with Gilulu and obtained some immunity against Totos, but seeing one appear so suddenly still surprised me.

"Hi, Rimee Wu, can you already ride a Totos by yourself?"

"Yes! But Rimee still can't make it run!"

Rimee Wu pulled the reins happily and made the Totos turn towards the way we were heading.

The two Totos were about the same size, but this one had a darker shade of color than Gilulu. There were spots of darker colored feathers on its body and neck, which sort of resembled a tiger's stripe. On closer inspection, every Totos was different.

"What is the Totos from the Fa house called? This is Lulu!"

“Oh, Lulu, what a cute name.”

“Yes! Because it’s the Totos of the Wu clan, its name is Lulu!”

<TL: They are actually the Loo clan. To avoid toilet humor, I dubbed them the Wu clan.>

Did the Zaza house and Sauti clan name their Totos too? I answered while thinking about that:

“The one in my house is called Gilulu.”

“Gilulu and Lulu, that sounds similar.”

Rimee Wu looked satisfied.

“Ah, Vena, thank you for your hard work. Asuta, welcome to the Wu clan. Thank you for making the trip here today.”

Mama Mia Lei and Leina Wu were waiting in the stove room.

“Rimee, Asuta is here, rest time is over. Go tie Totos up.”

“Okay~”

Rimee Wu rode Totos past the stove room.

Vena Wu also put down her luggage and was a little wobbly as she walked away.

“Thank you, Asuta... Lala didn’t notice, right?”

Leina Wu stood beside Mama Mia Lei and asked me quietly. I nodded.

“Speaking of which, it won’t be much of a surprise if she guessed that I will be staying behind to make dinner. We didn’t make any special mention of it though.”

“But with your great cooking skills, you can definitely serve a dish that will surprise Lala.”

Mama Mia Lei replied.

“No, after mulling it over, I’m worried that an unfamiliar dish might spoil her mood instead, so I just added some ingredient into a normal dish. It’s basically roast meat with tarapa sauce, so don’t expect too much.”

Despite my words, Mama Mia Lei and Leina Wu still looked at me with eyes full of expectation.

I was really adding just one new ingredient in, so I hoped they wouldn’t raise the bar too much. Anyway, I started to prepare the food.

I still needed to prepare the ingredients for tomorrow, and, to be frank, time was really tight.

“Sorry for the wait! Well then, Rimee will help Asuta... Ah, can Rimee help?”

“Yes, it’s part of my work after all. It would be hard for me to do this alone.”

Now that I thought about it, because of the massive amount of work, I couldn’t finish all the preparation work before dinner. If I closed the stall right on time, I would need to continue working after dinner.

But I didn’t plan to spend the night in the Wu clan village, so I wanted to clear all my work before dinner.

“Sorry, Mia Lei Wu, can you lend me some helpers? I will pay the same as for the work in the Post Station Town.”

“Hmm? In that case, let’s call Vena back. You have enough firewood, right?”

Oh right. If Vena Wu didn’t make a trip to the Fa house after we close shop, she usually made up for it by spending an hour foraging firewood for me.

“No, I want a helper who can assist me until dinner. Is there anyone in the branch house who can help?”

“In that case, one of us can assist you. The poitan has been grilled, so my side just needs two people.”

“Ah, that will be great.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Okay, let’s work hard! What should Rimee do first?”

Rimee Wu came up to me and said with a big smile.

When she saw that, Leina Wu said in a panic:

“Ah, erm... I-I will help Asuta!... I-Is that okay...?”

Rimee Wu turned her head in surprise, and Mama Mia Lei shrugged her broad shoulders.

“I’m fine either way. But, since this will be paid work, it will be better to send Leina, who is skilled in cooking, to help you.”

“Eh~! Rimee will work properly too!”

Rimee Wu puffed her cheeks.

“Rimee also wants to help Asuta work in the Post Station Town! You didn’t bring Rimee to the house head conference last time either, why are you always leaving Rimee out!?”

“Because you are still young. When you can carry a pot, I will let you take Lala’s place.”

When I heard that, an inspiration struck me.

“In that case, after the Fa house buys a wagon for our Totos, Rimee Wu might be able to help. I intend to come to the Wu clan village and ferry everyone into town.”

“Ehh? But wouldn’t that be the long route for you?”

“No, I will need to go across a suspension bridge when we go to the town from the Fa house, and the Totos won’t be able to pass through there. In that case, it will make more sense to meet up at the Wu clan village and go to the Post Station Town by the southern route.”

“Awesome!”

Rimee Wu jumped in joy.

Leina Wu looked at Rimee Wu and said a little squeamishly:

“Mama Mia Lei, you are letting Vena-nee work in the Post Station Town to stay on guard against the Tsun clan, right? In that case...”

“No, our relationship with Genos castle has become complicated, Ludo and the others have stopped guarding the stall too. Until the talk with them ends peacefully, I will need to let Vena tend to the stall.”

“...Yes, that’s right.”

Leina Wu was dejected.

“You too, Rimee. Until we can trust the Genos castle and ascertain they are not enemies, a child like you can’t enter the Post Station Town.”

“It will be fine! Papa Donda will teach them a lesson!”

No, that would be troubling for me. Anyway, we had to finish the work before us.

“Alright, let’s get started. Rimee, go help over there.”

Mama Mia Lei announced the start of work, and we started tackling our tasks.

“Let’s do some of the food preparation work for tomorrow’s business. We will start with the meat patty of the hamburg steak.”

“Alright, we will need to mince the meat and dice the aria.”

The next instant, Leina Wu’s expression changed.

She looked very serious. The denizens of Forest’s Edge treated their work seriously, but she seemed too hyped up.

“What should I do? Or should all of us tackle the same task?”

“Yes. We will dice the aria first, and when that’s done, one person will fry the aria, and the others will mince the meat.”

“I see... The fried aria will need to be cooled, so that’s the most efficient way to go about

it."

What was with her?

Leina Wu's 180-degree-change in attitude made me fearful, and I started dicing the aria with my Semu-made knife.

"...I heard this knife is worth 18 white copper plates."

"Yes, that's right."

"That's a ridiculous price, but this knife is really incredibly sharp. It appears even more so since you are the one using it."

Leina Wu kept observing my hands' movement as she chopped her aria nimbly.

"...What's the matter? You are already very familiar with such work, right?"

"No, I can't get too cocky. I noticed something during the house head conference. Venanee's and Lala's skill in tending to the hearth has improved."

"I-Is that so? When we are working in the Post Station Town, only Shela Wu and I would touch the knife though."

"I know that. I mean they have a better understanding of the workflow and how to make use of the extra time they have. It's the same with Shela Wu, her knife work and heat control is getting more refined."

Leina Wu was still chopping the aria perfectly as she explained to me.

"My cooking skills can't catch up to Shela Wu's anymore. That is to be expected since she has worked under your tutelage for a month."

"T-That can't be right."

"It's true. I'm still very childish, so I will feel frustrated over something like this."

Leina Wu showed me an expression I had never seen before and then smiled.

Like what Leina Wu said, she was still childish in some ways. Even though she had a

serious and gentle personality, there were times when she showed her forthright side. On the other hand, she could be very stubborn at times. Unlike the pure and innocent Rimee Wu and Lala Wu who expressed her feelings clearly, I needed to take more care when interacting with her. She was very girlish in that sense... That was my impression of her.

How should I describe her expression right now? Her face was filled with strong determination, competitiveness, and a vague sense of jealousy. Her determined smile had a hint of joy, making her look like a warrior who was preparing for battle.

Did she think of Shela Wu as a rival? Not in terms of love, but a rival in caretaking for the hearth?

“...Ah, sorry! I don’t hate Shela Wu, you know?”

Leina Wu reverted back to her childish expression and looked at her mother behind. Mam Mia Lei didn’t seem to have heard anything and was chatting as she peeled Chachi.

“I just want to tend the hearth seriously. Shela Wu is our important kin, and even if I feel frustrated, I will never treat her with disdain...!”

“No, I don’t think that at all. I think it’s important to maintain the will to improve.”

Leina Wu stared at my face for a short while and then showed a warm smile of relief.

Her emotions could be a little unstable, but I really wanted to support her, given the change in her mental state.

Shela Wu probably studied cooking seriously in order to find the value of her existence. She wanted to obtain wealth with her own abilities to help her family. Aside from that, the blissful faces of her family were also the motivation for her efforts.

Right now, Leina Wu didn’t show the forthright emotions of the denizens of Forest's Edge, and her feelings were a mess... She probably didn’t know what drove her to improve her cooking skills, and she was filled with frustration.

Maybe she wanted to improve her cooking skills because she wanted the recognition of others. I was no saint either, so I didn’t believe her motivation was impure. Such a reason wasn’t that rare in my world, and I thought everyone held such thoughts to

some extent. And of course, I was no exception.

Simply put, I found something that resembled myself in Leina Wu's thinking. We were just half-baked chefs who tied our cooking skill together with our pride, which brought us both joy and sadness...

“...What's the matter, Asuta? Your hands aren't moving.”

She showed a mischievous smile and chided me.

This was the first time I saw her making such a face.

Leina Wu might be facing a major turning point in her life, so she looked a little unstable.

Her every movement that seemed to herald a coming change was filled with charm and encouraged me.

I already said this plenty of times, these weren't feelings of love between a man and a woman. If I was allowed to exaggerate it a little, it seemed like the debut of a potential rival, which made my heart tremble.

Part 3

That night...

Before dinner began, her family gifted flowers to Lala Wu.

Lala Wu usually resided at the end of the table with Rimee Wu, but she was now seated quietly between the house head and the grand elder.

“...You are thirteen now. You are as tall as the other children your age, but you are still a brat on the inside.”

Donda Wu showed a straight face just like Lala Wu. When she heard his chiding words, the star for today retorted with a raised eyebrow:

“So annoying, I can’t even! I’m starving, so hurry up and finish it.”

“That’s why you are still a brat.”

Donda Wu showed a straight face and then, without standing up, he reached over and placed a big blue flower in her daughter’s hair.

“...Congratulations to my third daughter Lala for making through the year safely. May you be healthy for the upcoming year too”

“Alright, alright, thanks.”

Lala Wu scowled her nose and replied. The conversation between father and daughter felt really heart-warming.

Next, Lala Wu turned to Grandma Jiba seated on the other side and adjusted her posture. The 85-years-old grand elder Grandma Jiba stuck a red flower into her great-granddaughter’s hair with her twig-like fingers.

“Lala, congratulations... Stay energetic and lively in the future too...”

“Yes, Grandma Jiba, thank you.”

Lala Wu showed a forthright smile. When her father heard her cheery voice, he clicked

his tongue softly.

And then, Jiza Wu, who was holding a red flower and a blue flower, walked over and knelt down.

“I wish to give my blessing to my third sister Lala. May you become a fair lady who befits the name of the Wu clan... This one is from Darum.”

“Thank you.”

Lala Wu thanked him with a respectful face. The second son Darum Wu was in the Tsun clan village right now, teaching the Tsun clan branch house members to hunt.

After that, the rest of the family members came before Lala Wu one by one.

“Congrats... If you don’t put on more meat, the boys won’t notice you.”

“Shut up, retard!”

“Congrats, you have a kind nature; it would be perfect if you are not so vicious with your words.”

“...I told you lot to shut it!”

“Congrats, may you stay true to yourself in the future too.”

“Yes, thank you, Grandma Ditto Min.”

“You are so pretty, Lala, I like the way you are right now. Congratulations on your 13th birthday.”

“Babu~”

“Thank you. You too, Kota.”

“Congrats... You are already 13, how time flies...”

“W-What a big flower! Thank you!”

“Congratulations, may you stay healthy this year too.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“This is Mizora!”

“Thank you... I can’t even, the fragrance of the flower makes it hard for me to smell the food’s aroma!”

Even though Lala Wu was grumbling, she had a bashful expression. Her hair and chest were filled with flowers, and her blissful face made me smile.

“Lala Wu, congratulations. We aren’t your family members, but will you accept our flowers?”

And, finally, Ai Fa and I stood before Lala Wu.

“Yes.”

Lala Wu nodded, and Ai Fa stuck a flower on Lala Wu’s waist, while I put a red flower in the space I somehow found above Lala Wu’s ear.

Lala Wu’s fiery-red hair and eyes that were as blue as the ocean left a deep impression, so everyone chose either red or blue flowers.

Thirteen... She does look like that age.

I thought to myself quietly.

She wasn’t too short and had a slender build, delicate facial features, and a child-like expression. That was how mismatched a girl of this age was like.

She might be vicious with her words and look androgynous, but her charm would definitely rival her second sister in four years. In seven years, she would be a match for her eldest sister. Although my mind was filled with such rude comments, that was how likable a girl she was.

“Alright then, let’s start preparing dinner. Asuta helped us with dinner for today, you know?”

In order to serve soup to everyone, Mama Mia Lei stood up. Lala Wu shrugged her shoulders and said:

“As I expected, I knew you and Leina-nee were sneaking around. I’m happy about that, but don’t serve any weird dishes.”

“I don’t know if it will suit your taste; still, I hope you will like it.”

I walked towards the stove used to keep the food warm and picked up the lid.

The next moment, the hall was filled with the fragrance of tarapa.

“So it’s just tarapa, isn’t that the same as usual?”

The youngest son Ludo Wu complained.

Vena Wu always brought back the leftover tarapa sauce from the stall in the Post Station Town to complement their dinner.

“Sorry about that, tarapa is the most suitable sauce to complement tonight’s dinner. And this sauce is specially made by me.”

I didn’t want to use the leftover sauce from my stall, so I carefully adjusted the taste of this batch with the Jaguar-made Tau sauce and the Semu-made Chitto... By the way, Chitto had a strong taste that was like chili, so I only added a little for flavor.

The light-brown grilled chuck flap steak was soaked in the specially-made tarapa sauce. After scoping the steaks onto a plate one by one, I took the secret weapon from Ai Fa’s hands.

Of all the attendees, only Ai Fa who tried it in the Fa house and Vena Wu who accompanied me to the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> knew about this secret weapon. It was a Semu-made ingredient, which was so expensive due to its rarity that I couldn’t use it to make dishes for the <Cryptic Venerable Inn>. The portions being used today was my precious personal stash.

“What is that?”

Ludo Wu stared with his eyes wide open. The other women also looked intrigued.

It was a semicircle lump of white substance, about 15 cm in diameter and 5 cm thick. It was originally circular in shape, but because I often used it to make dinner in the Fa house, it became like this. Its surface was white, while the cut section was light yellow.

It cost 20 red copper plates for this wheel of cheese. This was an ingredient bought by the innkeeper of the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> for his own hobby, and it wasn't being sold officially. I asked him to sell one to me as a favor.

“Poitan? No? Is this even food?”

“This is food. There's an animal called Gyama in the eastern kingdom Semu. This is curd made from Gyama milk... My hometown call this ingredient cheese.”

I used the Santoku knife to cut the cheese into slices 7 to 8 mm thick.

I placed the pieces of cheese onto the steak covered in tarapa sauce, and the cheese melted immediately and gave off an incredible fragrance.

“Uwah, how should I put this... It's an incredible smell.”

“Isn't that so? I had never seen this ingredient in the Post Station Town, it is very nutritious and fills you with energy. Some people might be turned off by it at first, but there are people who will love it after tasting.”

The head of my house was an example. Putting a piece of cheese on a hamburg steak covered in sweet fruit wine sauce was the perfect dish to Ai Fa. I mentioned that the tarapa sauce complemented cheese the best only out of consideration of the head of the Wu clan who disliked sweet flavor.

“Well then, let's start dinner.”

Donda Wu announced sternly and said grace. After we repeated his words, we finally started dinner.

The first one to give her comment was the star of the night, which was a great honor.

“Uwah~, what is this!? It's yummy!”

“Yes, it's really good!”

Rimee Wu cheered alongside her.

I sighed in relief and chewed my own steak.

The sourness of the Gyama cheese was just like Camembert cheese. The taste was strong, but there was no stench. Be it the pale color or the thick sensation, it was really similar to Camembert cheese.

I didn't need to explain how well tomatoes and cheese complement each other. Tarapa tasted similar to the tomato, and its sourness meshed well together with the smooth texture of the Gyama cheese, which brought out the firm taste of the meat.

I thought these two ingredients were most suited for hamburg steak, but the grilled steak wasn't too far behind either. How savory, I couldn't help smiling.

“Well, the cheese is delicious...”

Ludo Wu said reservedly.

Huh, he didn't like it? I turned his way.

“But what is with this tarapa sauce? It tastes different from usual.”

“I spent some effort in seasoning this sauce and added Tau sauce and Chitto. I also adjusted the ratio of aria and fruit wine... Does the usual sauce taste better?”

“That's not possible. This sauce is so delicious that it surprised me.”

Ludo Wu tore off a piece of poitan, dunked it into the sauce, and then ate it.

“Hmm, so good... Now that I think about it, I haven't eaten your cooking for a long time.”

“Really? But when you were guarding us, I prepared snacks for you too. I also asked you to try the <Kiba braised meat> when I was researching it.”

“That's not what I mean, it's been awhile since you cooked a proper dinner for us, right? That's why...”

Ludo Wu started stammering at this point.

Grandma Ditto Min urged him:

“Don't hold back Ludo, just say it if you think it tastes good.”

“No, but...”

“Asuta, I’m surprised by how much your skills have improved.”

“Ehh? Is that so?”

“Yes. Thanks to your tutelage, we can cook all sort of dishes now. Leina’s and Mia Lei’s culinary skills have improved by leaps and bounds, and their dishes are as good as yours.”

“Don’t ask for the impossible, there’s no way we can match Asuta.”

Mama Mia Lei laughed heartily.

“I’m astonished too. Asuta’s cooking is really delicious. I made the dish with the same steps, so why does it taste so different?”

“Because the way we cook is different from Asuta. Be it heat control, knife work, amount of ingredients, adjusting after taste-testing, and little minute things that are hard-to-describe with words, all these are different from us.”

Leina Wu explained.

As Lala was in the seat of honor, Leina Wu was closer to us than usual. Her eyes were filled with admiration as she looked at us quietly.

“I’m really surprised. But Asuta has to prepare food for several hundred people every day, so, of course, his culinary skills will improve. But I’m still astonished.”

“No, hundreds is exaggerating too much.”

That might be so, but I did spend most of my time cooking. And I had been working hard to strive for perfection, so I felt embarrassed when hearing everyone praising me so frankly.

“Leaving me aside, Leina’s cooking has improved plenty too. Asuta, try the soup.”

Urged by Mama Mia Lei, I picked up the bowl of soup.

Tau sauce was added, so the meat soup appeared a little brown.

This soup was made by Mama Mia Lei and Rimee Wu. But the one to taste-test and do the final adjustment with Tau sauce and salt was Leina Wu.

After taking a sip, I yelled:

“Uwah, this tastes great.”

Leina Wu smiled happily.

“This soup was seasoned using a method thought up by Leina. She didn’t do anything complicated, so why is there such a big change in taste?”

There wasn’t any complicated seasoning... That was true.

After cooking the soup stock with kiba meat, it was seasoned with salt, Tau sauce, and Pico leaves. The only thing different was the Tau sauce, the cooking process remained unchanged.

The vegetables in the soup included aria, Chachi, and Gigo; they were ingredients similar to onions, potato, and herb.

I thought adding in slices of Gigo was brilliant. Ever since buying Tau sauce, I also added in Gigo frequently. The Tau sauce that was like soy sauce matched the Gigo very well.

This soup was really delicious. As this soup wasn’t cooked with any complicated methods, the taste depended on the seasoning, amount of ingredient, and the amount of heat. This meant that Leina Wu did well in all these aspects.

The key point was probably the Tau sauce. Speaking of which, I didn’t feel such an impact when I drank Leina’s soup ten days ago. There wasn’t any Tau sauce in the soup back then. After adding Tau sauce, the taste of the soup became richer... And as the number of seasoning increased, controlling the amount of each one became more important.

But that alone couldn’t explain how tasty this soup was.

I thought this soup was tastier than mine.

This meat soup had a deep flavor. Aside from the refreshing sweetness of the Tau

sauce, I could feel a vague after-taste too. It made the soup feel really special.

“Could it be... Aside from raw meat, you also brew this soup with grilled meat?”

Leina Wu opened her eyes wide.

“Not just that. The soup has a hint of charred soy sauce... Did you grill the minced meat with Tau sauce before adding it into the soup...?”

“That’s amazing! How did you know?”

“Did I get it right? I was making a wild guess... Leina Wu, that is really impressive.”

“Asuta, you are the one who is incredible, I still can’t win against you!”

When Leina Wu said that, her eyes were sparkling with happiness.

What kind of face was I making now? This was probably the first time that I felt another person’s cooking to be delicious in this world.

And the dish was made using the food I was familiar with, without any southern or eastern ingredients I didn’t know about. To be honest, I was very moved.

“Hey, brat.”

At this moment, Donda Wu finally spoke.

I turned and looked his way before I could recover from the shock from earlier.

“We will be hosting a feast two days later to celebrate the kiba harvest. Can I ask you to tend to the hearth?”

“...Ehh?”

Donda Wu finished dinner faster than anyone else and was drinking fruit wine from a bottle.

Lala Wu observed his displeased profile carefully.

No, not just Lala Wu. Everyone stared at the fierce clan head with eyes wide open.

“C-Can I help prepare for the feast?”

“...That’s what I’m asking you.”

Donda Wu’s ever-ferocious blue eyes were glaring at me.

“On that day, all the men from the Wu clan’s kin house will gather and perform the Test of Might ritual. A piece of kiba meat will be presented to the winner. I want you to prepare that piece of meat... How about it?”

“...If you are fine with me, I will be glad to do so.”

I nodded and accepted before I could sort out my thoughts, and Donda Wu replied: “I see.”



“Thank you very much for today! Asuta, your dish was absolutely fantastic!”

Dinner ended harmoniously. After chatting for a while, we bade our farewell from the Wu clan.

Lala Wu walked us out of the house. She was covered in red and blue flowers and had a blissful smile on her face.

“I really like that strange cheese thing! If Papa Donda permits, can you buy one for the Wu clan?”

“Well, it’s hard to procure it, so I will need to ask the innkeeper of the <Cryptic Venerable Inn>.”

“Thank you! Today is a memorable birthday thanks to you.”

When Lala Wu was really happy, she would express it clearly just like Rimee Wu. The sight of her face wiped away the hardship and exhaustion I felt for the entire day.

“By the way, I didn’t expect Papa Donda to ask you to tend to the hearth! I almost choked on your meal!”

“Yeah, I was surprised and happy about it too... Sorry for agreeing to it without

consulting you, Ai Fa."

"Don't worry, you should be proud that the tribal chief of Forest's Edge, Donda Wu, acknowledges your culinary skills."

Ai Fa said calmly as she held the reins of Gilulu.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but she looked a little peeved. Before I could bring that up, Lala Wu said to me cheerfully:

"That's right! And that is the Test of Might ritual! Papa Donda or Dan Lutim will definitely win! He definitely asked you to tend to the hearth in order to taste a delicious meal. You are incredible!"

"Test of Might ritual, huh. If that is so, Mida has a chance too, right?"

"It's impossible! Even Mida can't defeat Papa Donda or Dan Lutim. Dan Lutim once lifted the eldest son of the Mamu house, who is bigger than he, above his head!"

"Ah, is the Test of Might something like wrestling?"

If that is the case, it is unlikely for Donda Wu and Dan Lutim to lose to Mida.

No matter what, I had to do my best and present the dish to the winner.

"Alright then, time to go. Lala Wu, I will be counting on you tomorrow."

As we were about to go, the smiling Lala Wu tilted her head quizzingly, her gaze seemed to be looking past us.

"Ehh? It's Shin Wu and Mida. What are they doing at such a late hour?"

I turned around and saw two people walking over from the other end of the plaza.

Mida was holding a candle stand, and the light illuminated his face from below like a scene from a horror movie.

"Hi, Mida, I wanted to go over and visit, I didn't expect you to come over."

"Yes... Ai Fa is here too...?"

“That’s great, Mida of the Wu clan, you look healthy.”

Ai Fa answered seriously and narrowed her eyes a little.

“Did you get a little thinner? Although your body is still incredibly large.”

“Ehh? No way!? He is still as round as ever!”

Lala Wu laughed happily after saying something rude. No matter which world it was, girls of her age were all cruel creatures.

“Asuta... Ai Fa... Sorry...”

“Huh?”

“Why are you apologizing? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No... But because of Mida, you can’t sleep in the Wu clan... Mida is sorry...”

Mida’s face kept trembling, and she remained emotionless.

“When Mida’s house is done, Mida will return that house to you... Before that, Mida is sorry...”

“Mida’s house?”

I asked in return, and the ever-calm youth with high-cornered eyes said:

“He is building his own house under the supervision of my father Ryada.”

“His own house! So that pile of lumber you gathered in the afternoon is for building a house?”

“Yes... Mia Lei Wu wants Mida to build own house... Mida is so, so tired, but Mida is working hard...?”

Mida was still staying in the empty house we lodged in before. That was why we didn’t spend the night when visiting the Wu clan village. Mama Mia Lei was probably doing this out of concern for us, which made me feel really guilty.

When I was about to express my thoughts, Lala Wu stopped me.

“Don’t mind it, Asuta. We will need a new house anyway, Mama Mia Lei also thinks it is a good thing for a house member to learn new skills.”

“That’s right, according to the rules of Forest’s Edge, aside from the eldest son, the other children who take in a spouse or marry out will need to leave the house. There are seven children in the Wu clan main house alone.”

“That’s right, aside from Rimee and me, everyone else is over 15 and will leave the house soon.”

“Lala can marry in two years too.”

I muttered, and she hit my back hard.

Mida didn’t seem to understand what we were saying, and he looked at Ai Fa.

“...When Mida’s house is done, will you visit the Wu clan more often...?”

“Don’t worry about such things. We will visit this village again two days later... And this job will give you more strength, so you have to continue working hard.”

“...Ai Fa, Mida doesn’t understand you sometimes...?”

“...I hope you can continue working hard in the future.”

“Yes... Mida will work hard...”

Mida’s face started trembling again.

If he became thinner, maybe I could understand his thoughts better. I would then be able to grow closer to this unfathomable existence.

“By the way, why are you here, Shin Wu? Do you have some business with Asuta?”

On hearing Lala Wu’s question, Shin Wu showed a troubled face.

Seeing his expression changing, Lala raised her brow.

“Why are you making such a face? Do you want them to teach you the [Sacrificial hunting method]? Shela Wu is already earning copper plates, so you don’t need to do that anymore, right?”

“That was almost a month ago, please let it go.”

“Hmmp!”

Lala Wu turned her face away.

Shin Wu looked at the side of her pouting face and then reached out his right hand.

His fingers were holding a beautiful yellow flower the size of a palm. When Lala Wu saw the flower from the corner of her eye, she cheered:

“Uwah! Amazing! What a pretty flower...! Is that a Mizora?”

“Yes, this is the first time I found a yellow Mizora, that surprised me too. I noticed it during my hunt today.”

“Amazing! Eh~, so there are yellow Mizora! I have never seen one before!”

Lala Wu leaned in towards the yellow flower excitedly and said happily:

“It smells nice!”

“Even though only family members can present gifts to the birthday girl... Will you accept this?”

“Huh? You are gifting it to me?”

Lala Wu raised her head quizzingly.

Shin Wu nodded lightly with his usual face.

“Lala Wu, you like yellow flowers, right? Since I found this flower on your birthday, I want to gift it to you... Will that make you feel troubled?”

His calm face was slightly red, probably because of the candle stand in Mida’s hand shining at him.

I couldn't tell if Shin Wu was blushing, but Lala Wu's face was beet red.

"...Did I ever tell you that I like yellow flowers?"

"Yes, when we were younger than Rimee Wu."

"I see."

Lala Wu answered softly and then moved one of the flowers from her head to her breasts. She then turned her head and presented the created gap to Shin Wu.

Shin Wu gently inserted the yellow flower beside Lala Wu's temple. The yellow flower adorned on Lala Wu's fiery red hair produced a clash of vibrant colors.

"...I wish you will have a blissful year ahead of you."

"Thank you."

Lala Wu muttered softly and looked up at Shin Wu's face.

There wasn't much time left. I jabbed my house head with my elbow.

"Well then, we should go. Lala Wu, I will be counting on you tomorrow too. Shin Wu and Mida, take care of yourself."

"Ah, o-okay! Be careful on your way home! Thank you for today!"

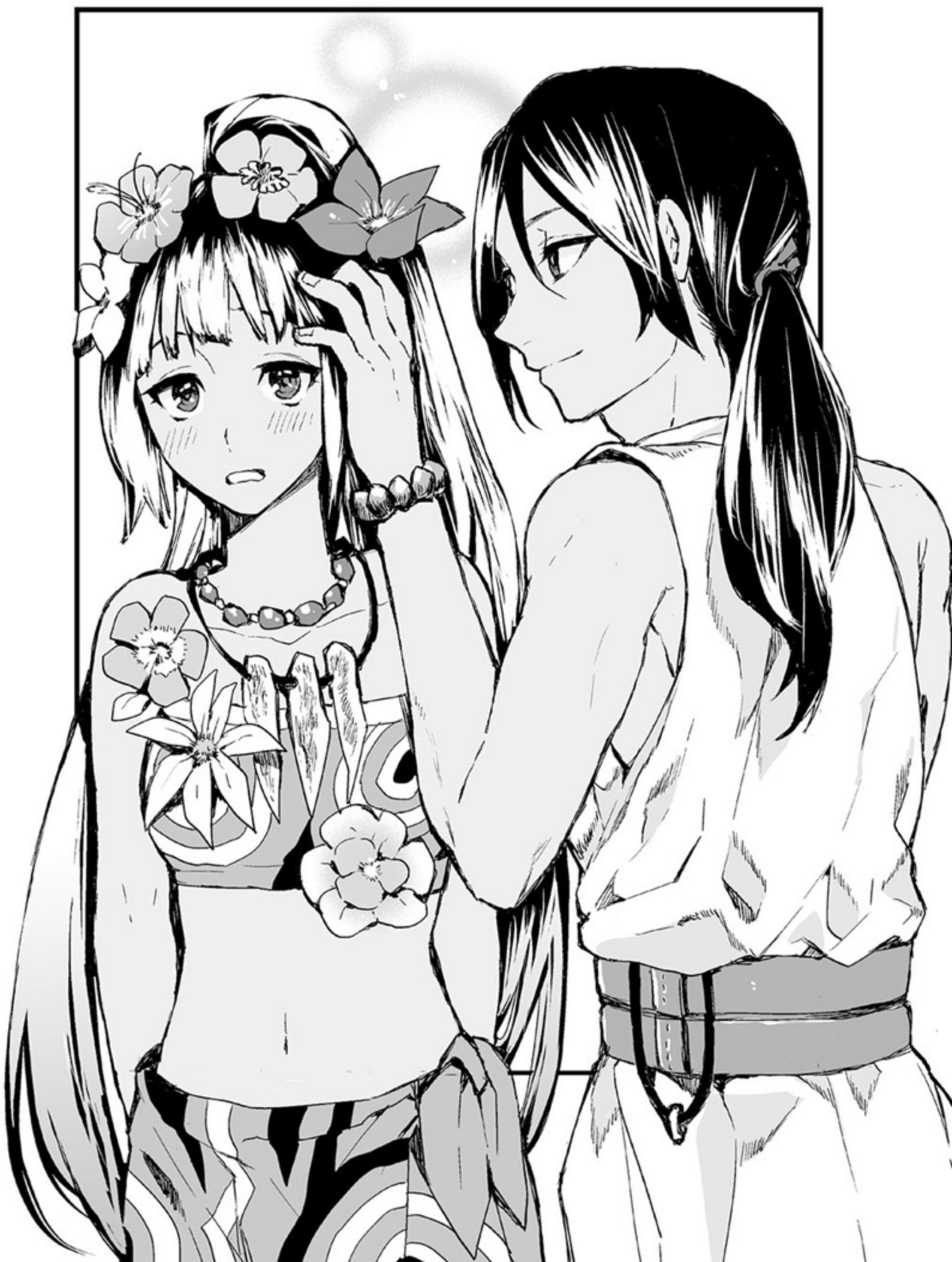
With Lala Wu and the others seeing us off, we crossed the plaza together with Gilulu.

The moon was very bright and clear tonight.

"Ara, what a wonderful day. It seems that, recently, we will only visit the Wu clan village because there are troubles. It had been so long since it was so peaceful."

I said sincerely, and Ai Fa merely replied: "Is that so?"

Huh? I turned back and found Ai Fa pouting.



“W-What’s the matter? I noticed that you have been looking unhappy all the while, did something upset you?”

“I’m very displeased... What is with the soup that the second daughter of the Wu clan made?”

“Huh? That’s just a normal meat soup seasoned with Tau sauce. It tastes delicious because the taste has been brought out exquisitely.”

“...What’s with your stupid smile? Didn’t you feel anything after eating that, Asuta?”

“No, I wasn’t smiling... Why are you so mad?”

We stopped for a short moment after leaving the plaza. Ai Fa glared right at me.

“Asuta! Cook a more delicious soup tomorrow!”

“Ehh? What are you saying all of a sudden? I will work hard on it, of course, but the taste of the dish is subjective...”

“Stop nagging! If you don’t promise me that, I won’t let you ride the Totos! I will drag you back home!”

“I get it! I will bet my life on it!”

“...Don’t forget your words.”

I was puzzled, but Leina Wu’s culinary skills seemed to have astonished Ai Fa.

I was elated to see her fuming. I couldn’t congratulate Leina Wu’s growth and do nothing about it. After all, she was no longer a potential rival in the future but already an equal. My fighting spirit was burning brightly.

Ai Fa seemed to have felt something from my expression. She stopped pouting and nodded solemnly.

“It’s fine if you get it. Let’s go back then.”

“Alright.”

We would finally challenge riding the Totos together.

We practiced a little last night, and I finally experienced the refreshing sensation of riding a Totos. Besides, if Ai Fa wore her fur cape, I wouldn't need to worry about sticking too close to her body...

As I was thinking about that, Ai Fa started undoing the button on her cape slowly.

“H-Huh? Esteemed house head?”

“What is it?”

Ai Fa placed the fur cape onto Gilulu's back.

After that, she pushed off the ground and leaped onto Gilulu's back majestically.

“Get on.”

“I-I will do that. But why did you take off your cape? You don't need to put it on Gilulu's back, it is comfortable enough without it.”

“Hmm? Because the wind will get into the cape and annoy me. It's fine if I'm alone, but if someone is pressing against me from behind, the wind will be trapped near my shoulders.”

“I see. But it won't matter since we won't be running at full speed, right?”

“It's not a big issue, but it still will be annoying. Enough with that, hurry on up.”

Ai Fa's eyes were gradually showing off an unhappy gleam.

I had no other choice but to take her hand and mount Gilulu's back.

I put my arms around Ai Fa's delicate waist... and then shouted immediately: “I can't do it!”

But Ai Fa ignored me and kicked the side of Gilulu's abdomen.

The next instant, Gilulu started trotting, and I hurriedly grabbed Ai Fa's body. She was only wearing two pieces of cloth around her chest and waist. And she probably used

the fruit that attracted kiba during her hunt, so her blonde hair that was tied up in a complicated manner gave off a sweet fragrance.

“The moon is bright tonight, I will make it run faster.”

Spare me! I wailed uselessly in my heart, and Gilulu started sprinting energetically. To avoid falling off its back, I had to hug Ai Fa with all my might.

On the day when Lala Wu turned 13, I found a rival in this world for the first time. That was how the 25th of the Blue Month ended.

Chapter 3

Cryptic Venerable Inn

Part 1

Let us go back in time for a little.

On the 18th of the Blue month, we visited the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> for the first time.

It had just been two days since the commotion regarding the Tsun clan, and the situation in town was still unstable. It wasn't a good time to expand our business, but catering food for the inn shouldn't agitate the westerners. Shumimaru and the others would only be in Genos for less than half a month, so I decided to make this decision.

“Denizen of Forest's Edge, Asuta, welcome. I'm honored by your visit.”

The innkeeper Neil came out of the inn to receive us.

After hearing the inn name, it might invoke an old man with a black beard. But this innkeeper was very young and didn't look older than 30. He had brown hair, dark brown eyes, and ivory skin. His facial features were plain; he was of average build and looked just like a typical westerner. The only prominent thing about him was being quiet and expressionless.

“Nice to meet you too... Sorry for picking such a busy time to visit.”

It was just past noon. As I didn't know how long I would need to work in the <Big Tree of the South Inn>, I headed for the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> when Rii Sudora arrived in the afternoon.

The quiet innkeeper shook his head and said:

“It's not busy during this time. This way, please; I will show you to the kitchen.”

The <Cryptic Venerable Inn> was a unique place. This inn wasn't situated along the bustling stone-paved road, but off an alley from the main road, surrounded by residential housing. It was a small two-story building without any signage, and it was impossible to tell this was an inn.

"Alright then, I'm going in. Thank you, Shumimaru."

I nodded and thanked Shumimaru who led us here.

The young easterner with white hair narrowed his eyes slightly with sadness.

"Asuta, I, in the way?"

"Huh? Not at all, but aren't you busy?"

"...I want, till end, stay."

Shumimaru was half a head taller than me. He became a bandleader at such a young age, but he would show an innocent side of him at times. Like right now.

"If you can accompany, I will feel more at ease..."

When he heard my reply, he nodded and squinted his eyes. The feeling of this squint seemed different from just now.

"I, till end, accompany."

So he would squint like that when he was happy. I tried to interpret it in my own way but wasn't sure how Shumimaru actually felt.

Anyway, we entered the <Cryptic Venerable Inn>. There were four of us in total: me, Shumimaru, Vena Wu, and the escort Shin Wu.

Although the commotion caused by the Tsun clan had ended, the feelings between us and the Genos castle had grown more complicated. Adding that incident in the Post Station Town which was bordering on becoming a riot, Shin Wu and Ludo Wu were still guarding us.

Wouldn't it interfere with their jobs as hunters? After asking that, I learned that the area around the Wu clan and Lutim house just happened to be entering the off-peak

season. In Forest's Edge, every area would experience three or so off-peak seasons annually, and the hunters would rest during this time for half a month.

The kins of the Wu clan would officially start to rest a short time later. On the first resting day, they would hold a harvest feast. In a few more days, Donda Wu would request for me to tend to the hearth for that feast.

At this moment, I wasn't expecting such a future. I followed Neil into the <Cryptic Venerable Inn>... and then gasped softly.

On the wall to the right and above the counter were the heads of large animals, used for decorations.

These were probably taxidermied specimens. They were animals that looked like a deer or a goat, and only the part above their necks was visible. It looked as if they were leaning out of the wall.

“Impressive, what are these animals?”

“They are beasts native to the eastern kingdom, called Gyama.”

The innkeeper Neil answered quietly.

This animal had a long snout with buffalo-like horns on both sides of its head. The size of its head was about that of a human. The curved horns were about 40 cm long, it was covered in raven black fur and long manes on either side of its neck.

“The people from the east eat Gyama. There isn't any chance to taste them in the west.”

Neil opened the door that led inside the counter.

Almost all the inns had counters that were connected to the kitchen. The customers could probably place their orders at the counter.

By the way, I took a glance from the counter, and the restaurant on the first floor was empty. The other inns were probably the same, as those lodging at the inns would buy snacks at the marketplace.

“Please come in.”

Under the guidance of Neil, I went through the door and came to a kitchen that was as small as the inn. It was about one-and-a-half tatami, with two pots on top of the two stoves near the wall. It was a standard layout found in most kitchens.

There was a workstation in the middle of the kitchen, a shelf full of crockeries to the left, and two flasks of water to the right. The kitchen's design was simple, and the kitchen was filled with the aroma of herbs and meat.

It felt really comfortable here.

I thought a kitchen would reflect the character of the user. Just experiencing the atmosphere in this kitchen was enough for me to feel closer to the young and cold innkeeper.

“Let me state my terms first.”

The innkeeper Neil said calmly:

“I will need 20 to 30 meals. The meal must use kiba meat. The price for one without fuwano is 2 red copper plates. The catering will start from the day after tomorrow... How long will the contract be?”

“My contract with the <Big Tree of the South Inn> will end on the last day of the Blue Month, can we do the same? We can renew our contract in the next month.”

“I understand. The contract will start two days later on the 20th and end on the 31st, for a total of 12 days. During this period, please inform me before noon if you aren't able to provide the meals on any days. If you notify me after the noon has passed, you will need to pay liquidated damages of one white copper plate. Do you agree to this?”

“Yes, I'm fine with this.”

“Alright then, as for the dishes, I heard you don't want to sell the same things as your stall, right?”

“Correct. I'm using a Jaguar-made seasoning known as Tau sauce for the food I'm catering for the <Big Tree of the South Inn>, and it is really popular. If possible, I plan to use a Semu-made ingredient to serve a dish that will satisfy the customers from the east.”

“I see. If the contents for lunch and dinner are the same, the customers might find the taste tiring. Thank you for your advice.”

The innkeeper kept a straight face when he offered me his thanks.

We only came on the supposedly earnest request of this innkeeper, but I couldn't feel the deep sincerity Shumimaru described from the innkeeper at all.

“Semu-made ingredients, huh... As Semu is even further away than Jaguar, most of the ingredients are not imported into the western kingdom.”

Despite what he said, Neil still went deeper into the kitchen and took out two ingredients from the food store. One was a small pouch, while the other was a large bag that needed to be carried with both hands.

“This is curd.”

“Curd?”

“An ingredient made by drying Gyama milk. It is as nutritious as meat.”

That was how I became aware of Gyama curd. A few days later, this ingredient shone brightly during Lala Wu's birthday party.

“This taste! It's cheese!”

“Cheese?”

“Yes, in my hometown, this is called cheese. I see, so there is cheese in this world... No, so there is cheese in Genos.”

“It is almost impossible to buy curd in the Post Station Town. The castle town had procured all the Gyama curd and Karon curd. A Semu caravan I'm on good terms with sold this to me as a favor.”

“<Silver Vase>, in past, sell curd, also.”

When he heard Shumimaru said that, Neil also nodded quietly. The two of them were calm and composed and didn't show any expression.

By the way, Shin Wu was also silent and kept a straight face. Vena Wu who didn't have anything to do had been fighting with her chestnut colored hair all the while.

"Gyama curd is a very common food in the Semu kingdom, but it's almost impossible to get this in the Western kingdom, which led to its high price. As the quantity is limited, it's not suitable to use it in food for sale. This batch is for my own consumption."

"Is it expensive? How much?"

"Curd about this size is about 20 red copper plates."

I see. This wheel of curd had a diameter of 15 cm and was 5 cm thick. Given its high price, curd was an expensive luxurious item. If we used it in cooking, the operating cost would jump greatly.

"But cheese is a charming ingredient. Can I buy a wheel for myself?"

"I can sell this curd to you. You want to try some?"

"Please let me!"

The uncooked Gyama curd was like strong salty Camembert cheese, with a thick and fragrant taste.

"Ah, this is delicious! Please sell it to me...! Don't you want to have a taste?"

The two of them shook their heads disinterestedly. Luxurious goods couldn't intrigue the denizens of Forest's Edge who led simple lives.

"Then, what about this ingredient?"

"This is Chitto fruit."

He loosened the bag's opening and revealed the large red bean contents inside.

The bright-red color and stinging smell gave the impression of this being very hot and spicy. This had to be some kind of spice. Judging from its smell, it should be some sort of chili.

“It looks spicy. Do Semu people like spicy food?”

“Yes. Chitto fruit, very important.”

It was Shumimaru who answered this time.

“Gyama meat, pungent smell, strong. Stronger, kiba, than. So, we eat Gyama and Chitto fruit... And we, pickled Chitto, like.”

“Pickled Chitto? You pickle meat with Chitto?”

“No, we, vegetable, pickle.”

Neil continued:

“Pickled Chitto is made by pickling vegetables such as tino with salt and Chitto.”

“Oh? That sounds tasty.”

Neil nodded, and head into the food store again.

When he came out again, he was holding a small plate with two leaves of tino that had been dyed with red sauce.

Tino was similar to cabbage and was white with a faint shade of green. It had been cut into appropriate sizes and doused with red Chitto sauce before covering with another piece of vegetable. This vegetable looked like chopped chives.

Both its appearance and sour-spicy taste of the pickled Chitto reminded of kimchi.

“It’s fragrant. This is Chitto and myam... and something like fish sauce?”

“Fish sauce?... We marinate Maru with salt when pickling Chitto.”

“Maru?”

“Yes. Maru is a small shelled creature that can be found along the river bank. Westerners eat Maru as a snack while drinking beer. Our inn also uses Maru to make pickled Chitto.”

Neil spoke even manneredly.

“It is almost impossible to obtain Semu ingredients in Genos. Hence, I tried to recreate the taste of pickled Chitto by using western ingredients... I marinated tino for a night, then added in Chitto, marinated Maru with myam, chopped chives, ground Ramam fruit and other ingredients to make the sauce for the pickling.”

He mentioned many unfamiliar ingredients.

I must have seen those vegetables in the stall, but still didn't know the names of many of them or how did they taste. I was still learning about the food in this world.

Anyway, I decided to try the pickled Chitto before me. And as I expected, spiciness and sourness spread inside my mouth.

The pickled Chitto had a simulating and complicated taste. The strong fragrance of myam and animal protein stimulated my appetite, and the thoroughly pickled tino turned very soft, and the texture was crunchy like a Chinese cabbage.

It was very hot and spicy, my tongue would hurt if I ate too much at one go. But the aftertaste was refreshing. It was as good as the kimchi I tasted in the past. Besides, it had been so long since I properly tasted “sourness”.

“How is it? Some Semu like this taste of spiciness.”

“It's very tasty, I like it... If I use this ingredient, the dish will become very expensive, right?”

“No, pickled Chitto is just a snack. The customers won't eat large quantities of it. A small plateful would cost about half a red copper plate.”

“I see... Have you tried cooking pickled Chitto with meat or adding it to soup?”

“You are referring to pickled Chitto, not raw Chitto, correct? Even the easterners won't eat them that way.”

“I see. Is eating it this way unacceptable?”

I asked Shumimaru.

He shook his head quietly.

“Eat, this way, strange. But, interested, me.”

“Okay.”

In that case, I should work on this from the angle of kimchi pork or kimchi hotpot. I started pondering.

The dishes might sound random, but I had placed a restriction on myself recently—“time restriction”.

I didn’t expect another inn to cater from me so soon, that was why I prepared **<Kiba braised meat>** for the **<Big Tree of the South Inn>**. I didn’t regret my choice, but, unfortunately, the cooking time was rather long and would need two-and-a-half hours to cook. Even after getting used to the process, it was hard to finish it within two hours.

Including preparations and closing, my stalls were open for about 6-and-a-half hours in the Post Station Town. If I spent too much time in the inn cooking the dishes, I wouldn’t be able to return to the stall in time to work.

This was just my personal preference, I liked to interact with the customers directly when I set up shop. If I let the women handle all of this task, I would feel a bit lonely. Hence, my hidden task for this time was to think up a dish that wouldn’t take too much time for the **<Cryptic Venerable Inn>**.

“If my dish uses pickled Chitto, can I buy the required amount from the **<Cryptic Venerable Inn>?**”

“I see, you will buy my pickled Chitto that will be used in your dish, and I will buy that food from you? How interesting.”

“If you aren’t willing, I will think up a dish that makes use of raw Chitto instead.”

“No, I will be happy to let more customers taste the pickled Chitto I made. And I’m also interested in dishes made from my pickled Chitto.”

Despite what the innkeeper of the **<Cryptic Venerable Inn>** said, his face remained emotionless.

Part 2

“And so, I’m researching a new dish.”

That night, I asked Ai Fa to try out the dish immediately.

The dish that was served wasn’t kimchi pork, but [Chitto kiba]. Instead of kimchi hotpot, [Chitto hotpot] was laid out on the table. Ai Fa showed a complicated expression in the face of the completely red meat dish and soup dish.

“Asuta, can I say something?”

“Yes, Ai Fa, what is it?”

“I’m well aware of your hearth tending capabilities, but... I think this dish had turned sour.”

“Ah, so that’s the issue. Don’t worry. Rotting and fermentation are different. Just like how fruit wine is a bit sour, these dishes are not harmful to the body!”

“...If you say so, then that’s probably true.”

Although that was what Ai Fa said, she was slow in picking up her utensils.

There were no problems with the presentation of the dishes. Adding tarapa to the food would make it even more red, so what made her concerned was the intense sour smell.

I was confident about these two dishes. I used loin meat in the [Kiba Chitto], and, aside from the pickled Chitto, I also seasoned it with Tau sauce and added some myam. I also added thin slices of aria and pula to fry it. The bitterness of the pula was similar to green pepper, and they were mixed together with the pickled Chitto into the fake chives— bebe leaves, adorning the dish with vibrant green colors.

On the other side, I added chuck flank that had been cut into cubes and thin slices of thigh meat into the [Chitto hotpot] to cook thoroughly. The Tau sauce formed the primary taste of the soup, enhancing the flavor and making it thicker.

I added aria and tino in too. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find anything to replace Chinese cabbage, tofu, and shredded konjac. Even so, the stock made from kiba and the spicy

Chitto meshed perfectly, and I had been salivating all the while.

“I understand that the denizens of Forest's Edge don't like tastes that are too strong and can't stand spiciness and sourness. That's why I have prepared normal grilled meat and soup, and this is just a taste sample. Will you try it?”

“...”

“Ah, if you are not interested, there's no need to push yourself...”

“...Who says I'm not eating?”

Ai Fa steeled herself and reached for the plate of [Chitto hotpot].

However, her brave eyebrows drooped just from sniffing the food from up close.

“H-Hey, I already told you to not push yourself. I only prepared one sample, so I will finish it all off if you won't dare to eat it.”

“I already told you it's fine!”

Ai Fa raised her eyebrows again and grabbed a spoon.

And so, she put a spoonful of bright-red soup and a piece of kiba into her mouth and turned expressionless like an easterner.

“...How is it?”

Ai Fa put down the plate quietly.

She chewed the kiba solemnly.

Is she fine? I looked at her anxiously, and she bent her finger my way, gesturing me to come over.

It was rare seeing Ai Fa calling someone over in such a rude manner. I shifted over on my knees, and she hit the back of my head with a hook punch.

“That hurts! You don't need to hit me...”

I shut my mouth halfway through my gripes.

Ai Fa's appearance turned drastically.

In other words... She was covering her mouth with both hands while sitting on the ground, her eyes tearing up, her face beet red and fluttering her legs.

"That hurts! That's hot! It's like my mouth is on fire! What did you make me eat!?"

"Ah, no, sorry..."

"You think apologizing can solve this problem!?"

Ai Fa stood up with her eyes red and rushed to the water flask beside the stove.

"Ah, Ai Fa, you can't negate the spicy taste by drinking water, you know?"

I heard that drinking Lassi was the most effective way of neutralizing the spiciness of chili. And from my personal experience, hot tea would help too.

When the Habanero fried rice I made half-jokingly turned out terrifyingly spicy, my childhood friend Reina recommended hot tea for me, and the fire in my mouth was put out immediately.

However, lukewarm water wasn't just ineffective, it would increase the sensation of spiciness instead. Drinking cooled water might be momentarily soothing, but when the coolness faded away, the spiciness would return with renewed intensity.

I didn't know the logic behind this, but everyone had their own theory. Some thought that chili had components not easily dissolved in water, and some believed that washing the mouth with cold water just made the spiciness more prominent.

Hence, what would happen to my beloved house head? After scooping and drinking several mouthfuls of water, she relaxed for a moment before covering her mouth and starting stamping her feet.

"A-Ai Fa, drink this normal bowl of soup. It's hot, but the fats from the kiba might wash away the spiciness!"

Ai Fa charged back with amazing speed.

But she ignored the bowl and kept whacking hard at my head with teary eyes. Ai Fa might have held back, but she still had the arm strength of a hunter. I could see stars appearing at the back of my eyeball.

Tens of seconds later, my house head collapsed onto the floor breathlessly, and the hearth caretaker leaned against the wall with a mild concussion.

“ This is the first time that I thought I would die while eating.”

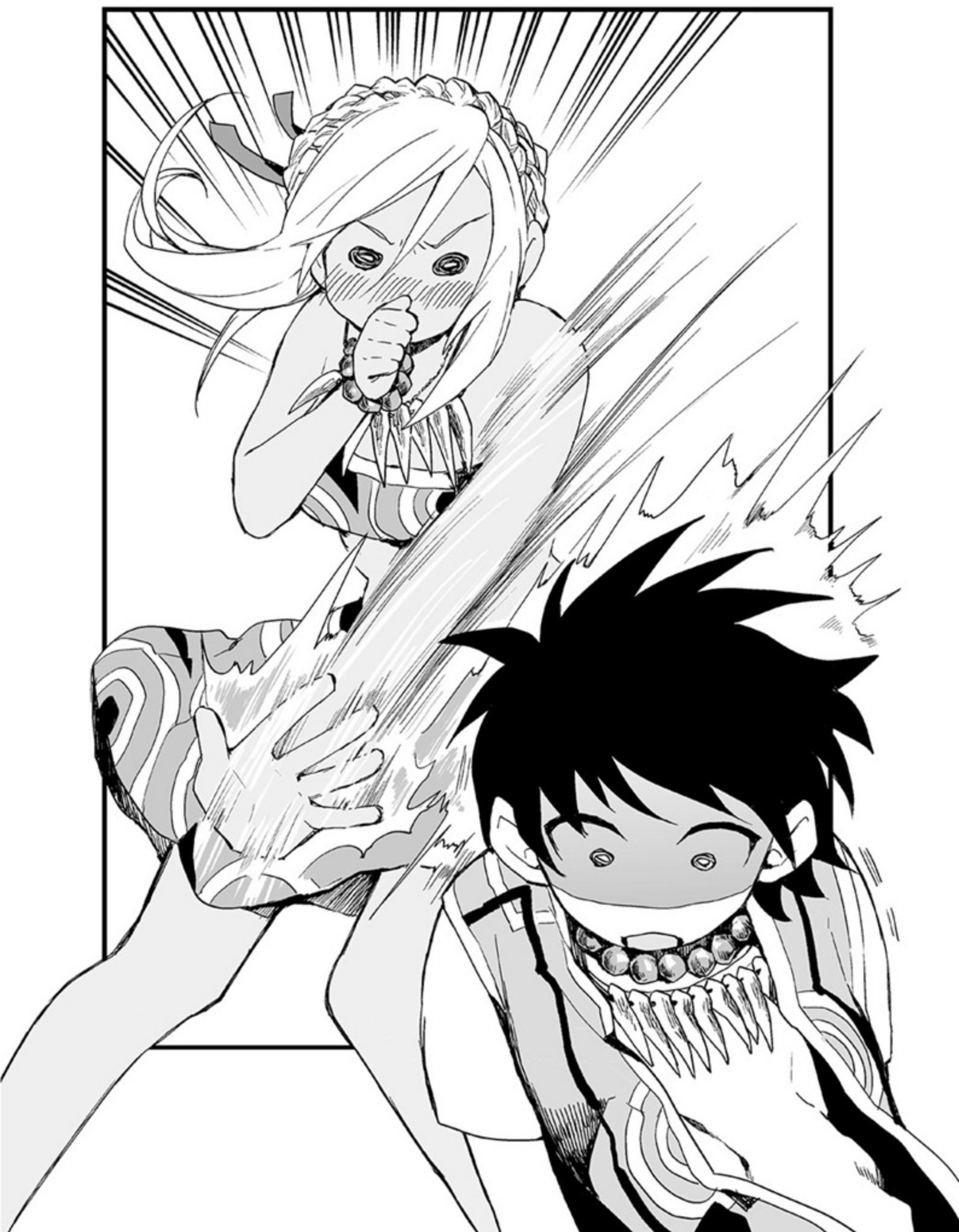
“...My sincere apologies.”

After we spent ten or so seconds to recover, dinner began anew.

“It seems that the denizens of Forest's Edge must never try Chitto fruit. Ai Fa, your sacrifice may have saved the lives of countless other denizens... Never mind, no one but me will bring such things into the Forest's Edge anyway.”

“Hmmp!”

“I'm very sorry... Look, this is the meat and soup I prepared specially for you!”



It was a thick slice of loin steak covered with basic fruit wine sauce. The soup was seasoned mildly with Tau sauce.

The bright red [Kiba Chitto] and [Chitto hotpot] were placed before me.

...To think that I will have to eat all of this by myself.

When I developed the [Myam-roasted meat] and [Kiba braised meat], I was also criticized by Ai Fa for seasoning it too strongly, but this was the first time she gave up on sampling my food. The dinner covered in Chitto made me feel a little dejected, but what saddened me the most was Ai Fa turning down my food.

Never mind, I will treat this as a lesson. I have to reduce the quantity when preparing samples in the future.

I thought as I sipped the soup from the [Chitto hotpot].

So spicy.

But the [Chitto hotpot] was delicious.

Seems like using Tau sauce was a good decision. Although the [Chitto hotpot] was spicy and swelteringly hot, the spiciness wasn't sharp and brought out the freshness of the dish.

The tino in the pickled Chitto was soft and mushy, and the fresh tino I added in had a refreshing texture. The two contrasting textures complemented each other.

Although a large quantity of aria was added, most of it had dissolved into the soup, giving it more depth. Aria wasn't just nutritious, it was also an excellent ingredient.

And the star of the dish, the kiba meat was cooked for 80 minutes. The loin and thigh meat turned soft and tender after being cooked for so long. As I couldn't reduce the cooking time of the meat, it would slightly overshoot the time restriction I set for myself if I wanted to cater the [Chitto hotpot] to the <Cryptic Venerable Inn>.

Hmm~, which dish will the innkeeper prefer? I think both of them are equally good.

I took a bite of poitan, let my mouth rest for a moment and then picked up the bowl of [Kiba Chitto].

This dish as well was simple and could bring out the flavor of the ingredients. Although it was seasoned with myam and Tau sauce, this was just kiba meat and pickled Chitto being mixed together and fried.

I used a large amount abdomen meat for the [Kiba braised meat] and [Myam-roasted meat], so I decided to use loin meat for this dish. Loin meat was softer, and I would cut the tendons for the meat near the shoulders, so it was best suited to be fried together with vegetables.

I fried it with large quantity of aria, and the kiba meat was covered with Chitto. I picked up a piece of [Kiba Chitto] and put it in my mouth.

The firmness was just right.

It was good and tasty.

The presence of the kiba was strong, and the spiciness was as strong as the pickled Chitto. I could taste the bitterness of the green pepper-like pula, which gave variety to the taste.

The Fa house didn't have much seasonings available: just rock salt, Pico leaves, myam, and fruit wine. But we obtained Tau sauce a few days ago and the spice called Chitto fruit today. The repertoire of flavors increased greatly, which stimulated my tongue and stomach.

How blissful... I thought to myself.

“Hmm? Ai Fa, what's the matter?”

When I realized it, Ai Fa was tugging on the corner of my vest.

Her face looked a little scary.

“...Give me that.”

“You mean the [Kiba Chitto]? It is as spicy as the [Chitto hotpot], you know?”

“But I haven't tried it yet.”

“No, you don't need to force yourself to try it.”

“...Shut up and give it to me.”

She suddenly scowled her brows and nose like a cat.

With no other choice, I gave her the plate.

“Don’t beat me up because it’s too spicy, alright?”

“Shut up.”

With that, Ai Fa glared at the [Kiba Chitto] as if it was her sworn enemy and then hesitated for a few seconds before shoving the bright red meat into her mouth with a spoon.

She started chewing and teared up right away. But she didn’t go on a rampage like before and just drank some Tau sauce flavored [Kiba meat soup].

Ai Fa took another bite of poitan and then said to me with teary eyes: “Give me that too.”

“Ehh? Do you still want to eat [Chitto hotpot]? Don’t be a masochist!”

“...I told you to shut up.”

She ignored my counsel and snatched away the plate of [Chitto hotpot].

After hesitating for a while again, Ai Fa ate it.

Her eyes turned watery.

“H-Hey, Ai Fa, are you alright?”

“...I’m fine.”

Ai Fa wiped her eyes with the back of her hand like a kid.

“Okay, I will eat half, so you eat half of this too.”

“Eehhh? That’s too reckless! I told you to not push yourself!”

“I’m not pushing myself. I really want to eat it.”

After saying that, she took another bite of poitan as if she wanted to swap the flavor. Her words weren’t convincing at all. I was saddened when Ai Fa turned down this dish, but she didn’t need to push herself.

“...What’s with your face? I already said I want to eat it, are you going to reject it?”

“No, but...”

“I really want to eat it. My mouth hurts and my eyes will run when eating it, but it’s strangely appetizing. As if there is an evil spell cast on these dishes.”

After saying that, Ai Fa took another bite of [Kiba Chitto].

She probably wasn’t doing this out of consideration for me but due to being addicted to the spiciness.

“It hurts... Asuta, are my lips swollen?”

Ai Fa suddenly leaned her face towards me.

Her lustrous lips had a wet gleam about them.

“...Your lips are as beautiful as ever.”

She slapped my temple this time.

“It’s all because the way you are eating makes it so delicious, that’s why it stirred my appetite! What a problematic dish.”

“Even though it is too spicy for you, you still think these two dishes are delicious? If that is true, I will be really happy.”

“Honestly, I don’t know either. But I just want to keep eating it.”

And so, Ai Fa kept drinking the[Chitto hotpot] soup and muttered with teary eyes: “It still hurts...”

Part 3

At noon, I brought the same bunch of people and gathered in the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> once again.

“Sorry for the wait. This is the dish made from pickled Chitto.”

The expressionless Neil and Shumimaru stood before me as I placed the two plates on the table.

I made the [Chitto hotpot] at home and had just finished reheating it. The [Kiba Chitto] was made in this kitchen.

After the pickled Chitto was reheated, its aroma became stronger. Vena Wu and Shin Wu inconspicuously took refuge near the window, taking care not to show any changes in their faces in order to be polite.

“I see, this is really different from a dish made from raw Chitto, I’m looking forward to it.”

Neil picked up the plate with the [Kiba Chitto].

“But you have to buy the pickled Chitto from me, so the ingredient cost will increase greatly. Will you make a profit?”

“The ingredient cost of this dish is twice that of the other dishes, but cooking with raw Chitto takes too much time, so I plan to use pickled Chitto for this meal.”

The cost should decrease if I used Chitto fruit, but I would need more time to research before I could present a dish that matched the dish made from Neil’s homemade pickled Chitto.

I planned to start researching raw Chitto dish from today. Even though I could get kiba meat cheaply, I shouldn’t ignore the profit margin.

Shumimaru would be leaving Genos in less than half a month, so I hoped he could taste the dish which I felt was the most delicious right now. That was the reason why I made the [Kiba Chitto] and [Chitto hotpot].

“Well then, through the dark lord amen.”

Neil and Shumimaru picked up their spoons.

Both of them tried the [Kiba Chitto] first.

After they took their first bite... This was the first time I saw Shumimaru opening his eyes so wide.

But he didn't give any comments. He just picked up the bowl of [Chitto火锅], took a sip, and then closed his eyes in silence.

“How's the taste?”

When I asked that, a shout “Incredibly delicious!” drowned out my voice.

The one who yelled wasn't Shumimaru, but Neil. He was trembling with the plate of [Kiba Chitto] in his hands.

“What a strong seasoning! This is indeed the taste of the pickled Chitto I made, but that's not all, right? You added myam? Did you add myam?”

The innkeeper was expressionless just now like Shumimaru, but he was looking at me in shock right now.

“Ah, y-yes. I also added some Tau sauce.”

“So it's Tau sauce! It's really savory. But the key to the taste lies in the kiba meat after all. This meat goes perfectly with pickled Chitto!”

Next, Neil grabbed the bowl of [Chitto火锅] and slurped it down noisily.

“This is great too! The taste is really deep! This is completely different from adding smashed Chitto into the soup! To think there is such a way of eating pickled Chitto... Ah, splendid! I can wolf down a few bowls in one go!”

“You flatter me.”

As I just stood in place, stiff from surprise, Neil finished the [Chitto火锅]. I wasn't sure if he was too hyped or if this was the effect of Chitto fruit, but his ivory skin turned

completely red and he was sweating profusely.

“My customers will be so happy! Ara, I never thought that my pickled Chitto can be eaten in such a way! Asuta, the rumors are true, you are really an outstanding chef! I’m so lucky to have met you, I must offer my thanks to the western god Selva and the eastern god Semy! This dish is really...”

At this moment, Neil finally came to his senses and looked at Shumimaru beside him in a panic.

Shumimaru remained expressionless as he stared at the innkeeper.

“My... My apologies! I showed my emotions before a customer from the east...”

“Fine, it is. An important friend, Neil is.”

Shumimaru answered calmly, and Neil lowered his beet red face.

“Shumimaru, what do you think?”

To avoid the long silence turning awkward, I interjected nonchalantly.

Shumimaru turned to me and narrowed his eyes into a thinner slit than Jiza Wu.

“Delicious, it is... All your dishes, the best.”

And then, I saw the corners of his thin lips rising for the first time, and he showed a gentle and warm smile.

“A shame, this is. My emotion, showing... But, good, it is.”

“T-Thank you.”

I was really glad.

As we were talking, Neil took out a handkerchief to wipe his sweat, calmed himself down, and then said:

“Ahh, what a surprise. Both dishes are delicious, I can’t decide. If possible, can you provide these two dishes on alternate days?”

“That’s fine. But this hotpot needs to be cooked for a longer time, so I hope you can continue stewing it over a weak fire after I’m done with it...”

“That’s fine. I will already make some profit from the 30 pickled Chitto you will be buying from me every day, so I am happy to help.”

It seemed the number of meals had been set to be 30.

And so, I successfully made a contract with the <Cryptic Venerable Inn>.

“Asuta, you are really an incredible person. Why is an excellent chef like you staying in the Post Station Town? Are you from the castle town?”

“No, of course I’m not from a big place like the castle town. However, restaurants are quite common in my hometown.”

“Excuse me, may I ask where you are from? The western kingdom?”

It had been awhile since someone asked me that question.

“I’m not from this continent. My hometown is an island country called Japan. I don’t know the reason, but when I woke up one day, I found myself collapsed in the Morga forest.”

“Japan... I have never heard of that place. After all, only people from the northern kingdom Mahildra have dealings with people from foreign continents.”

“I see. I have no idea how I got to this continent.”

Neil tilted his head puzzledly, while Shumimaru narrowed his eyes in deep thought and looked worried.

“So you are not from the western kingdom, huh. I finally understand why you can live in the Forest’s Edge so easily and get along with the denizens of Forest’s Edge.”

Even though Neil had reverted to his polite and expression self, he was still chattering a lot.

“This is wonderful. I visited Semu when I was young and was mesmerized by their mysterious culture. But I still couldn’t forsake the western god and move to Semu.

However, I hope the citizens of the four major nations can grow closer to one another.”

“I see. But aren’t the western kingdom Semu on friendly terms with Jaguar?”

“You are right. But friends are just friends, and won’t become family. If a child is born between citizens of both countries, the child can only choose one god and lose one of their parents.”

This was the first time I heard of that.

Neil showed a slightly bitter smile.

“I wanted to take an easterner as my wife, but I can’t give up on the western god and don’t want to force the other party to forsake her religion. So I’m still a bachelor at such an age.”

In that case, the innkeeper Naudiz from the *<Big Tree of the South Inn>* who had dual heritage from the south and the west must have had a complicated family history.

I thought only those with parents from hostile nations, like Kamyua Yost with his northern and western bloodlines would face such issues.

“I have always been interested in you who has broken the barriers of race and makes a living in Forest’s Edge. To be honest, I’m really happy to see you live so freely... So you weren’t a citizen of the four gods from the very beginning.”

Neil leaned towards me suddenly.

“Forsaking a god is a big thing. That’s why the denizens of Forest’s Edge who abandoned their belief in Jaguar and became citizens of Selva had such hard lives. This had always pained me. Asuta, a non-believer like you will definitely bring a huge change to Forest’s Edge, please lead them to a better future.”

“...The most I can do is to cook them a meal.”

“That’s good enough.”

Neil couldn’t help smiling.

His smile was really warm, which made me feel that he didn’t need to suppress his emotions.



Everything went smoothly after that, and we left the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> without any incident.

As we walked down an alley, we would cross path with other people from time to time, although traffic wasn't as busy as the main stone-paved road. At this moment, Shumimaru said to me quietly:

“Asuta, not this continent, you are from?”

“Ehh? Yes. I didn't have the chance to tell you that.”

I did tell him I was from Japan before but didn't mention that Japan wasn't a country on this continent.

To others, this wasn't important, but I wasn't sure if I was mistaken, but Shumimaru seemed a little lackluster.

“Sorry, I should have told you sooner. I didn't mean to hide it...”

“No, don't matter, you where from. Foreign friend, I think of you. But why you strange, now know I... You star, no see.”

“Star?”

“Brethren, star read. Malefic star go, he know. But you star, he see no.”

He quickly narrowed his high cornered eyes; a beautiful light shone in the dark pupils between his eyelids, and he looked at me carefully.

“Worried, your future, I was. So, read your star, my brethren did. But, no read he... say brethren, not there you.”

“That's...”

I wanted to ask further, but I was hesitant to.

The uneasiness I had been suppressing in my heart was growing.

Before my uneasiness seized me, Shumimaru grabbed my fingers calmly.

“But, Asuta, here. Important friend, you are... If you, allow me, think you friend.”

“...Shumimaru, you are my important friend too.”

I tried relaxing my stiff expression into a smile.

“I’m not sure if saying this to a customer is appropriate, but I had always thought of you as a friend. I will feel lonely when we part in ten or so days.”

“Even in, different lands, we two, friends still. The *<Silver Vase>*, to Genos, will return. Even when, Semu back, visit Genos, still will. See you again, hope to.”

After the Blue month ends, Shumimaru’s *<Silver Vase>* would leave Genos and continue doing business in the western kingdom. Next, they would go to the capital before returning here. And, finally, they would return to their home country Semu.

As long as we were alive, we would have the chance to meet again.

As long as we were alive...

As long as I won’t get teleported somewhere out of the blue.

But even so...

I would never forget the people I met in this world.

Even if I got transported to another realm or return to my old world... and die in the ensuing fire, I won’t forget the people I met in this world and the life I had led until the moment my conscious fades. After renewing my resolve, I finally smiled at Shumimaru.

“Thank you. No matter how far we are apart, I will pray for your safety and well-being.”

“...Your conversation is like a couple that just got engaged...”

Vena Wu interjected unhappily.

“Besides, you will still stay in this city for more than ten days, right...?”

“Yes. Until, end, blue month.”

Shumimaru squinted his eyes a little troubled and let go of my fingers.

“Left, twelve days. Happy, eat your food.”

“Yes, I will work hard to cook delicious meals every day.”

By the way, has he given up on Vena Wu? It wasn’t my business, but I was still worried about that.

I fell into deep thoughts again. Shumimaru and Vena Wu believed in different gods. Officially, the denizens of Forest’s Edge were citizens of the western kingdom Selva.

If they were to be wed, one of them would need to change their religion. Like what Neil mentioned earlier, this was no easy task.

Furthermore, Shumimaru was the bandleader of a Semu caravan that travels between Genos and the other city in the western kingdom, while Vena Wu was the eldest daughter of a tribal chief in Forest’s Edge. Their status and position wouldn’t allow them to easily disavow their religion... If they were to be together, they would need to cut ties with many of their kins. That would be difficult.

...I’m not even sure if Shumimaru has really fallen for Vena Wu, so no point worrying about that.

However, if my premonition or delusion turned true, I hoped for no one to get hurt in the end.

Even if we believe in different gods, we were still living in the same world.

If even the people in the same world couldn’t obtain happiness, my future would be dim.

I hoped my precious friends wouldn’t have a tragic future... With that wish in mind, I prayed quietly.

Chapter 4

Traveler Friend and Frugalist

Part 1

It had been three days since I decided to officially cater meals for the <Cryptic Venerable Inn>.

Today was the 22nd of the Blue month.

After closing shop, I asked Kamyua Yost about the issue of the ownership of the Totos again. I then asked something I had been curious about—“the diet of a traveler”.

“Well, a traveler’s meals are simple. When they have to spend more than a day on the road between towns, travelers will need to bring ready-to-eat meals with them. I think I told you before, the jerky sold in the Post Station Town is a classic ready-to-eat food.”

We were staying inside the restaurant of the <Kimyusu’s Tail Inn>.

Ludo Wu accompanied as my escort, and Kamyua Yost’s disciple Leito was also standing beside him.

“The most common and cheapest way is to boil the poitan, dried aria, and jerky together in a pot. People who are more well off will add some rock salt and herbs. You can imagine how that tastes. Even the cheap snacks in the Post Station Town are tastier than this poitan soup.”

“I see~, boiling poitan, aria, and jerky, huh. If aria and fresh meat are used instead of dried aria and jerky, that will be just like a kiba pot eaten by the denizens of Forest’s Edge.”

Ludo who was not used to sitting in chairs and was leaning against the wall interjected suddenly. Kamyua Yost looked at him and showed his usual cheery smile.

“This must be the knowledge that the forebears of the Forest’s Edge learned from the

town. If not, the denizens of Forest's Edge wouldn't have known that they can live healthily by eating these vegetables. You only had the chance to buy vegetables from the town after moving into the Morga forest."

"I see, that's why the nutritious aria and poitan became the staple food of Forest's Edge. After hearing you saying that, I finally understand."

When he heard me say that, Kamyua Yost nodded sagely

"That's right. People can live a healthy life by eating aria, poitan, and meat every day. Not just that, they are cheaper than the other vegetables too, a perfect ingredient. Not just travelers, soldiers will add jerky and dried aria into their poitan soup too."

"Soldiers too?"

"Yes. I'm not talking about the guards in town, but soldiers in a war zone. And of course, the aristocratic commanders will be enjoying fine cuisine in the safety of a castle."

I said "I see," and brushed off Kamyua Yost's joke.

"Why are you so interested in the diet of a traveler? Are you planning to abandon Genos and run away to Jaguar or Semu?"

"That's impossible. It is almost time for me to hand the kiba jerky to the Semu caravan. I'm curious how the jerky they bought will be eaten."

"Hmm? Then you should ask the people from the caravan. The way the food is prepared for easterners and westerners is different."

"No, they won't be eating them, they will be reselling to customers on their journey. The ones tasting jerky will be westerners. So I want to listen to your opinion."

When he heard me say that, Kamyua Yost clapped his hands excitedly.

"I see, reselling, huh. The further away from Genos, the fewer bias people will have towards kiba. That's great business sense."

"Is that so? Thinking about it carefully, those people are willing to buy kiba jerky from me at the market price of Karon jerky. If they want to make a profit by reselling it, the

kiba jerky will be sold at a higher price than Karon jerky. Can they really sell it?"

"You don't need to worry. Karon and Kimyusu are very cheap in Genos. In some cities that don't have large livestock farm, the price of meat will be twice that of here."

I see, I thought to myself quietly.

Contrary to my expectations, the longer I talked to him, the more useful information I obtained. I heard that Kamyua Yost spent most of his time every year wandering the world, so he was very knowledgeable.

"So there are farms raising Karon and Kimyusu as cattle. No wonder the price of these two types of meat is relatively stable."

"That's right, the neighboring city Dabagu is renowned for their large Karon farm. It is within half a day's ride on a Totos. That's why they would send large amount of Karon meat to Genos everyday... But the people in the Post Station Town can only eat the leg meat of the Karon."

"Eh, is that so?"

"Yes, the meat from Karon's torso tastes nicer and is more tender than the leg meat, so the castle town would buy all the torso meat, resulting in the Karon meat in the Post Station Town being so cheap."

I couldn't ignore these words.

"I'm sorry, but are the Karon jerky sold in the Post Station Town also made from leg meat?"

"Probably. Only travelers and soldiers would eat jerky. The calf meat tastes worse than the thigh meat and cost less too, so they probably made jerky from the calf meat... What's the matter? Why do you look so serious?"

"No, my stall had only been using the chest meat of the kiba to make jerky. Because the thigh and shoulder meat that doesn't have much fats tastes more bland when made into jerky."

Even so, why wasn't the jerky business improving at all?

Seeing how troubled I looked, Kamyua Yost stroked his thin chin.

“The kiba jerky you gifted me last time does taste better than the Karon jerky sold in the Post Station Town. However, travelers won’t care too much about the taste of jerky too much. They will soak it in the poitan soup anyway, so they can’t tell the difference in taste anyway.”

“In that case, what about using powdered poitan as food? It can be eaten after grilling it on a journey. The jerky and aria can be boiled in water, which will be a sumptuous meal.”

“Yes, that’s a great idea. But right now, only the denizens of Forest’s Edge know how to grill the powdered poitan into a form like fuwano, right?”

“Ah, that’s true. Then, we can spread this skill in the Post Station Town...”

“Asuta, is that really fine?”

Kamyua Yost’s tone changed.

He didn’t have his usual pretending-to-be-retarded smile and was grinning sagely instead.

“Asuta, you are selling kiba food in the Post Station Town, so for every 100 meals you sell, there would be 100 Karon or Kimyusu dishes that won’t be sold. But despite that, your business is still unaffected, do you know why?”

“The reason, huh... Because the people in town fear the denizens of Forest’s Edge?”

“That’s not it. Like I said, the people from Dabaggū are the ones selling the meat in Genos. The snack stall owners might be unhappy about their sales dropping, but they are just the wives of innkeepers earning chump change on the sideline. Even if their stall closes down, they won’t become homeless and wander the streets.”

“I see...”

“It’s the same for the Dabaggū people, their losses aren’t that heavy that they will pick trouble with you. After all, Genos isn’t their only clients, and they will sell tens of Karon every day. They will sell a few less Karon at most, and only the cheap leg meat. They won’t be happy about it, but it isn’t worth complaining about, and they will at most

click their tongue and forget it... However, if you intend to expand your business through the sale of poitan, you need to be careful."

But why? I asked him with a look.

Kamyua Yost put an elbow on the table and smiled quietly.

"Because the people in the castle town raise fuwano crops, while the Post Station Town people grow the cheap poitan. If the people of Post Station Town find out how delicious poitan are and won't buy fuwano, the nobles who manage the northern farmlands will suffer huge losses. Can you imagine how dangerous this is?"

"Is that so... I can understand that..."

"I'm not stopping you from doing this, but you are trying to improve relations with the people in the city right now, so doing that is dangerous. Teaching the people of the Post Station Town how to make poitan delicious is a dangerous weapon against the nobles, I hope you can keep this in mind."

"..."

"In order to live on, there are times when you need to wield your blade. But if you mistime the moment you wield your blade, you might hurt your allies. Be careful when you wield a blade."

Kamyua Yost smiled cockily after saying that.

Part 2

I bade Kamyua Yost farewell and, when I returned to the Fa house, there were already several women waiting for me there.

“Hi, everyone’s so early... Hmm? What’s the matter?”

“Here, the jerky as promised.”

The timing was just right. I asked these houses to help me make the jerky ordered by the *<Silver Vase>*.

Shumimaru’s Semu caravan *<Silver Vase>* ordered 40 kg of jerky from me. I felt that this was a good chance to distribute the wealth to everyone, so I not only bought meat from them, but also asked them to make the jerky.

“Thank you, everyone. I will check one at a time.”

Rii Sudora and I brought the equipment for the stall into the room and then ushered the women in.

There were members from the three houses here, which were the Fou, Latzu and Gazu houses. The Latzu and Gazu houses were further away from the Fa house, so this was the first time I had met the women from their houses.

“Let me start first.”

The woman from the Fou house gave me a large sack used to carry vegetables.

I opened the sack and saw a lot of jerky rolling around inside. I picked one palm-sized jerky at random and then sliced off the edge with a knife.

They used Pico leaves and salt to completely remove the moisture before smoking it, and the jerky became as tough as wood. I put the slice of jerky into my mouth, and the strong saltiness and taste of herbs, as well as the condensed taste of the kiba, spread in my mouth.

The taste was fine. They used meat that had been properly bloodlet.

I then placed the jerky on a board and then cut the tough jerky cleanly in two from the middle. The jerky was rock hard, proving that the middle was completely dry.

“Well then, thank you for your hard work... Erm, please wait a moment.”

I picked out the copper plates from today’s earnings and handed them to the woman from the Fou house.

“Seven white copper plates and red copper plates each, please check it.”

“...Yes.”

The woman’s face turned as stiff as the jerky.

Seven white copper plates and red copper plates each. In terms of tusks and horns, that was roughly six kiba worth.

It was rare for the denizens of Forest’s Edge to sell such a large amount of jerky. Hence, such a chance might not come again. Even if it did, I would arrange for the other houses to take the job. I already told them this plenty of times when I gave them this job, but even so, the remuneration was immense for them.

“Well, next batch of jerky, please.”

The jerky brought in by the Latzu and Gazu houses was fine too.

The women didn’t look overjoyed and looked relieved instead. They accepted the copper plates respectfully.

“Asuta, the Sudora house will bring you the jerky tomorrow, we will be in your care.”

Rii Sudora who was seated beside me bowed courteously.

At this moment, someone knocked on the door from the outside.

“I’m Ema Min Lutim, I have brought four women from the Wu clan kin houses over. Is Ai Fa or Asuta in?”

Ah, it was Ema Min Lutim again. I stood up.

Ema Min Lutim visited the Fa house yesterday and two days ago too. She brought 3 Totos yesterday and one Totos the day before yesterday.

Did she find more Totos? I opened the door carefully and was relieved to only see women from the Forest's Edge in front of me.

I saw an unexpected face. It was a girl of petite stature, her brown hair was tied up like an onion... She used to be the youngest daughter of the Tsun clan, but was now a member of the Lutim house, Zwei.

"Hello, Ema Min Lutim. I didn't expect to see you three days in a row, is there anything I can do for you today?"

"Yes, I'm visiting with my family Zwei. She wants to ask you something... Let's finish the work with these women first, alright? They have brought the jerky they made with them."

There were women from the Lilim, Mufa and Mamu houses, kins of the Wu clan I wasn't familiar with.

When splitting the job of making the jerky, I prioritized the poorer houses as much as possible. But only the Fou, Latzu, Gazu and Sudora houses learned to bloodlet by the deadline. So I gave the rest of the jobs to the Wu clan. Mama Mia Lei then used her discretion to assign the job of making jerky to the houses who were not so well off as the Wu clan and Lutim house.

Some kin houses of the Wu clan were impoverished like the minor houses, the Fou and Latzu. The women weren't dressed as nicely as the Wu clan members and had a plain air about them.

The denizens of Forest's Edge were hardworking and honest, no matter how wealthy they were. All the jerky they brought was fine and good enough to sell.

"Alright, it's fine. Thank you, everyone, for your hard work. I will ask you for help again if the chance arises."

"We are very thankful too... Asuta of the Fa house, will we get in your way if we observe your work?"

The woman from the Mamu house asked.

“It’s fine.”

After answering, I turned towards Zwei.

“But before that, you have business with me, right? What’s the matter?”

Was it a grave matter related to the Tsun clan?

Zwei grunted “Hmmp!” and then folded her slender arms before her chest.

“Let me tell you first, this won’t be a short conversation, you know? It might last until the sun goes down, are you okay with that?”

“That will be troubling. I need to prepare for my business tomorrow, as well as dinner.”

“In that case, you can listen to me as you work! If you don’t give me a satisfactory answer, I won’t go back to the Lutim house!”

She appeared a little emotionally unstable.

With no other choice, I prepared the ingredients needed for my work and started dicing the aria as I listened to Zwei.

“Asuta of the Fa house, you asked seven houses to make jerky, right? I want to confirm something about that.”

“Ehh? You want to talk about jerky?”

“Yes, what else should I talk about?”

Only six days had passed since Zwei’s grandfather Tay Tsun passed away. I thought she would be talking about that and even braced myself for it. It seems like I thought too much.

“The remuneration for this job is seven white copper plates and red copper plates each, correct? And the jerky will require the chest meat of two large kiba... Anything wrong so far?”

“Yes, you are right.”

I asked each house to prepare 6 kg of jerky.

To make 6 kg of jerky, roughly 15 kg of abdomen meat was needed. In order to extend the preservation period, all of its moisture had to be removed.

“...In that case, why did you only pay 12 red copper plates to the Wu clan?”

“Huh?”

“The Wu clan sells one kiba to the Fa house every day, correct? Even though one kiba only costs 12 red copper plates, just the jerky from the chest meat alone can earn 77 red copper plates? Isn’t these numbers strange?”

She glared at me with her eyes where the white part was more prominent as she spoke with a screechy voice.

“Well...”

I chopped the aria as I calculated in my head.

“First, I need to tell you something. The price of fresh kiba meat being too low has always been bothering me. But there isn’t any so-called market price for kiba meat, so we are pricing the meat of the kiba based on their tusks and horns.”

Or rather, Mama Mia Lei insisted that the Wu clan had plenty of excess meat and didn’t want any money for them. I had to convince her with such a price.

“...And so? How did you come up with the price of jerky?”

“I used the Karon jerky sold in the Post Station Town as a reference. I asked everyone to make 600 red copper plates worth of jerky; the Fa house will take 10 percent as commission and divide the rest equally among the seven houses.”

“Every house is paid 77 red copper plates... which is equal to 539 red copper plates, the Fa house only takes 61 red copper plates. Hmmp, looks like your calculations are correct.”

The eight women around us listening in looked troubled. Their mental arithmetics probably couldn’t keep up with us. Besides, they thought such things were meaningless.

Zwei wasn't fazed by their reactions and rambled on.

"In that case, the price of the fresh meat should be benchmarked against the price of fresh meat in the Post Station Town too, right? How much does the meat of that Karon thing cost? Not 12 red copper plates for one, correct?"

"I had never been to a butcher, but the price of meat you buy for your personal needs and bulk purchases by inns or stalls are several folds different. That might be so, but the price of the kiba right now is really low."

"So how much does it cost exactly?"

Was she testing my mental arithmetics?

Normally, 100 g of Karon meat costs one red copper plate. When the <Big Tree of the South Inn> procured the same amount of meat, they could push the price down to as low as 0.37 red copper plates.

I used 12 red copper plates to purchase around 40 kg of meat from the Wu clan. I didn't know what kind of animal the Karon was, or how big it was. I didn't know how much one Karon cost, so I had to assume it weighed as much as a kiba.

Which meant...

In a normal market, 1 kg of Karon cost 10 red copper plates, so 40 kg will cost 400 red copper plates.

If I calculate in terms of bulk sale, 1 kg is 0.37 red copper plates, so 40 kg will be... 148 plates.

The difference between these two numbers was huge, but normal people won't buy 40 kg of meat in one shot. The price was so high because they are buying in small quantities.

"Anyway, the bulk sale price is about 148 red copper plates."

"It seems like you are oppressing the Wu clan and buying at less than a tenth of the price!"

Zwei shouted and then squinted her eyes suspiciously.

“And isn’t 148 red copper plates too little? How much does the same amount of jerky cost?”

“When making jerky, its weigh will fall by more than half, if we compare the price of fresh meat with jerky... Hold on.”

100 g of Karon jerky was 1.5 red copper plates.

If the bulk price of Karon meat was 0.37 red copper plates...

“Hmm, the price of jerky is four times that of fresh meat.”

“Four times!? Why so much!?”

“Rock salt is used when making jerky, and, considering the expenses involved, this is a reasonable price, right? There is also the workmanship involved in making jerky, and the cost will increase if you buy from a retailer instead of a supplier.”

“...I don’t understand. It feels like I have been conned.”

Was that true? Then let’s do a thorough calculation.

If we made 10 kg of fresh meat into jerky today, we would need to preserve it with Pico leaves and marinate it with salt. After smoking it, the fresh meat would shrink to 4 kg of jerky. The salt used was about 5% of the meat’s weight. 10 kg required 500 g of salt, which was 3 red copper plates.

The 10 kg of fresh meat was priced at 37 red copper plates, and after adding the price of the rock salt, that would be exactly 40 red copper plates. The price of jerky was 1.5 red copper plates per 100 g, 4 kg would be 60 red copper plates.

The ingredient cost of 40 divided by the price of 60, multiplied by 100, that would be 66%.



So the price was very reasonable and not expensive at all.

I concluded by using the actual numbers:

“The cost of fresh meat is 37 red copper plates, while the price of jerky is 60 red copper plates... Taking away the cost of rock salt, the earnings are 20 red copper plates, you know? Is that really cheap?”

“This price isn’t cheap in Genos. However, their strategy revolves around selling large quantities with thin margins, so the calculations would be roughly the same even if you use Karon meat instead of the kiba that I’m selling.”

If I prepared the meat myself, the cost ratio of the [Kiba burger] would just be 25%. If I used Karon meat instead, the cost ratio would spike to 65.8%. Simply put, the same would apply to the other stalls too.

“Hmmp... so in order to earn money, you are buying meat from the Wu clan for cheap?”

“You misunderstand. I had negotiated with them many times to raise the selling price, but Mia Lei Wu refused to accept. She thinks the excess meat should just be returned to the forest anyway.”

This girl had an economic sense that the denizens of Forest's Edge lacked. With her standing right before me, I couldn't help feeling that this was a good chance to set an appropriate price for kiba meat within Forest's Edge.

“Well, Zwei and Ema Min Lutim, can you help me tell Mia Lei Wu that I want to amend the selling price of kiba meat? Not just for the Wu clan, I plan to buy meat from the other houses too, so I want to use this chance to set an adequate price.”

“I see. Are you going to set the price at 148 red copper plates, just like Karon meat? The price will rocket ten times.”

“I’m fine with that. Or rather, this is the right choice. Our goal is to let the people of the Post Station Town buy the kiba meat at an adequate price.”

Zwei finally quieted down and looked at me as I finished up chopping the aria.

“...I get it. Looks like you really want to let all denizens of Forest's Edge benefit and aren’t taking all the profit for yourself.”

“Of course. This might sound a little cocky, but the Fa house won’t have anywhere to spend the money no matter how much we earn.”

“But you can buy anything with copper plates.”

“Is that so? Copper plates can’t buy bonds and trust, right?”

After I made that joke, Zwei grunted loudly.

“I was planning to interrogate you until it gets dark, but it ended so quickly.”

“That’s wonderful. Zwei, it has been a meaningful discussion, I’m very satisfied.”

I wasn’t being polite, I really felt that way.

In the Forest's Edge, Zwei who was so obsessed with copper plates was an abnormality. However, in order to bring prosperity into Forest's Edge, someone with economic senses like her was necessary. Speaking of which, the most out-of-place person in Forest's Edge was me. This was the first time I met a fellow tribe mate who could see things from the same perspective as me. I was secretly happy that an abnormality like her was now a kin of the Wu clan.

“I finished my business. What now, Ema Min Lutim?”

“Well, there are no chores to do even if we rush back, so let’s observe Asuta’s cooking.”

Ema Min Lutim smiled happily, and Zwei wavered uneasily when she saw Ema’s smile.

At this moment, someone pulled open the door from outside without any hesitation.

Only a family member could open the door without permission, so, naturally, the one who entered was Ai Fa. Ai Fa was also heaving a 60 kg kiba on her shoulder today, and she threw a sharp sideway glance at the scene inside the room.

“Welcome back, house head. So you hunted something today too.”

After Ai Fa restarted hunting two days ago, this was the second kiba she got. There wasn’t many kiba during this season, but the harvest by the Fa house was incredibly bountiful.

I received the house head with a smile, but she showed a cold expression and said: "You seem really happy today, huh.". She didn't enter and just closed the door.

What did she mean by happy? I was clueless.

The only thing different today was that there were nine women in here with me, and many women had been visiting recently. Maybe this was a bit too many.

"...Sorry, Asuta."

Ema Min Lutim bowed towards me.

"Huh? Ah, no, you don't need to apologize."

"Is that so?"

She tilted her head and then leaned towards my ear.

"Aside from me and the lady from the Sudora house, everyone else is young unwed women, so maybe Ai Fa is unhappy about that?"

I was shocked and stared at Ema Min Lutim who was leaning in. There was a cheeky smile that befitting her age on her ever-calm face.

And so, the 22nd of the Blue month ended peacefully.

Chapter 5

Offal and Girl

Part 1

The next day after Lala Wu's thirteenth birthday, 26th of the Blue month.

I was working hard at preparing the food for the stall when Ai Fa returned home with a kiba on her shoulder.

“Uwah, you caught another kiba. Amazing, you haven’t been back even ten days, and this is already the third one?”

“Hmmp. But this is a young kiba, and its tusks and horns can only fetch two copper plates each.”

It might be young, but it was definitely over 40 kg. Besides, even though the kiba was petite, it was really plump and had plenty of fats.

Ai Fa greeted the women from the Fou and Dean houses who looked at her with admiration, walked to the space in front of the stove, and strung up the kiba on the tree branches. While doing that, she said to Gilulu who was tied to the tree nearby:

“Gilulu, I’m home.”

It sure was peaceful.

We would be meeting with the people from the Genos castle four days later. How long would such a peaceful life continue?

As I was thinking about this, an elderly lady suddenly said in awe:

“Ahh, that’s done really well.”

I turned and saw Tulu Dean shifting a grilled poitan onto a plate. Their poitan didn’t

have any Gigo, but it still turned out soft and fluffy. The light-caramel-colored surface made it look really appetizing.

“That’s great, Tulu Dean. You have a talent for this.”

“No...”

Tulu Dean lowered her head. Her expression didn’t change much, but the way she was blushing a little looked really cute.

This girl used to live in the Tsun clan branch house. She had long brown hair that was tied into two ponytails at her neck. Her eyes were blue, and her cute features were filled with melancholy and a little bit of lifelessness.

The Tsun clan village was bound by strange rules in the past, which made the girl timid. She would show an angelic smile from time to time, and I could feel her gentle personality from her minute gestures. If she had grown up in a normal environment, she might be as lively as Rimee Wu. I couldn’t help thinking about that.

“Tulu Dean, your technique in grilling poitan is great. Bring some kiba meat with you next time, I will teach you how to cook a meat dish.”

When she heard me say that, Tulu Dean’s face turned redder, and she said squirmishly:

“But...”

“Asuta of the Fa house, according to the rules of Forest’s Edge, we should cook dinner using our own stove. We already grill our poitan here; if we even prepare our meat here, it would be an affront to the rules of Forest’s Edge.”

Jass Dean, the elder sister of the Dean house head and also the elder sister of Tulu Dean’s late mother, butted in. She was a middle-aged woman with a gentle face and stern eyes.

“Ah, that’s right, there’s such a rule. So aside from the poitan, everyone learned to cook the other ingredients through observation... But it’s hard to learn the skill by just watching alone.”

“That’s true. But Tulu Dean was taught before by you during the house head conference, so her hearth tending skill is outstanding.”

Tulu Dean's hung her head even lower when she heard these compliments. Her attitude made me feel awkward too, it seemed that she lost her immunity towards kindness and goodwill.

“Ah...”

Tulu Dean gasped quietly.

I followed her gaze and saw Ai Fa eviscerating the skinned kiba.

“What's the matter?”

I tried asking, but her only reply was: “It's nothing...”

The Tsun clan village avoided hunting whenever possible and ate the torso of the kiba. In that case, they probably ate the offal of the kiba too.

“Offal, huh. There is a beast similar to kiba in my hometown too, and its offal tastes good. I wonder what the offal of a kiba tastes like.”

The thought of our conversation ending like that felt like a pity, so I continued talking. At this moment, Tulu Dean turned and look at me in surprise.

“A-Asuta, do you eat kiba offal in your hometown too?”

“Hmm? Not kiba, but an animal similar to it. The meat of both animals tastes the same, so I thought that kiba offal might be tasty too.”

“Y-You can eat offal!”

It was rare seeing this shy girl shouting. She blushed and hung her head low.

Jass Dean and the Fou house women stood stiffly in surprise.

“Ah, did the Tsun clan village even eat kiba offal?”

“...Yes.”

Her voice was whimsical.

“So you did eat kiba offal. The offal doesn’t look tasty, so the Tsun clan members hate hunting so much.”

Jass Dean looked at Tulu Dean sternly.

“No, in my hometown, the offal of animals is a delicacy, an important ingredient for us. Besides, the offal contain different nutrients from meat, which is another reason why we hold it in high regards.”

Half the reason why I spoke was for the sake of Tulu Dean, and the other half was because of my curiosity towards offal dishes.

“To be honest, I felt it was a pity whenever we discarded all the kiba offal. Tulu Dean, can you tell me how did you cook kiba offal?”

“Ehh...”

Tulu Dean felt troubled, and her eyes were wavering.

Jass Dean sighed softly and knocked Tulu Dean’s head gently.

“Asuta of the Fa house has shown you great kindness, right? This might be a trivial matter, but you should do whatever you can to help him.”

“...I understand.”

Tulu Dean nodded, and she raised her gaze towards me.

If I wasn’t mistaken, there was a gleam of happiness in her blue eyes just now.



“I don’t know any complicated techniques, I only know we should remove the parts that are too stinky and then wash the offal with water.”

We followed Tulu Dean’s instructions and headed to the water source.

We put all the offals into a pot and then carried the heavy pot to the water source. Jass Dean and the seemingly uninterested women from the Fou house also followed; there were five of us in total. Ai Fa was busy dismembering the meat and didn’t participate.

“First, we need to discard this part.”

Tulu Dean grabbed a lump from the pot.

It was spherical and about the size of a ping-pong ball. The color looked nasty, so this was probably the bladder.

“And this part of this organ.”

She grabbed a heavy red lump—the liver. We had to get rid of a small greenish-yellow bag on it—the gallbladder.

If the bladder or gallbladder broke, a strong stench would get on the meat, so we had to be very careful when removing the organs. The hunters from the past taught me the same thing too.

“When a kiba is pregnant, this part needs to be thrown away, but this kiba is fine.”

It was a white and curvy organ, and after hearing her explanation, this might be the uterus. This was a female kiba.

“I see. Then let’s wash it with water. Where should we start?”

“Ah, before washing it, we need to cut the surface of these two organs and remove the filth.”

These two organs... One was a narrow white organ connected to the pink and curvy large intestines and was filled with wrinkles—it’s probably the rectum. The other was a large bloated pink object—the stomach.

I see; this kiba was fat, so it must have eaten a lot of Forest’s grace when it still lived. We had to remove the contents of its stomach.

The rectum was connected to the anus, so it should be full of shit. We were still newbies in terms of preparing the offal; compared to the filth in the rectum, the possible contents of the stomach made me more uncomfortable.

“Erm... Kiba not only eat fruits and greeneries, but also snakes, lizards, and worm, correct?”

When she heard me said that, Tulu Dean tilted her head quizzically.

“Yes... Speaking of which, we once found snakes inside when we cut this open.”

“Uwah, so I’m right!”

“But they were just snake carcasses though. There were some that were venomous, but they were dead, so it wasn’t dangerous.”

“You are right, but...”

“Asuta, are you scared of dead snakes?”

Tulu Dean giggled.

What an adorable smile.

“In that case, let me handle it. Asuta, can you lend me your knife?”

“No! If I’m afraid of the contents of the stomach, I won’t be able to cook offal in the future!”

I braced myself and pulled out a knife.

I stabbed the knife into the stomach, carefully cut it open, and, as expected, fruits and grass that had turned dark green appeared in the stomach.

“There aren’t any snakes, right?”

Tulu Dean cleared the filth in kiba’s rectum as she smiled brilliantly at me. She probably didn’t realize that she had been smiling all the while.

By the way, the kiba filth was like balls of karinto and didn’t feel dirty at all. If I didn’t breathe through my nose, cleaning the filth or the contents of the stomach wasn’t tough at all.

Anyway, we successfully cleared the filth from the stomach and rectum.

We used the small stream flowing between the rocks to carefully clean the stomach and rectum and then worked on the long and curvy small and large intestines,

followed by the uterus.

We washed the exterior of the thin intestines, cut it open, and then cleaned the inside and outside thoroughly. We got the other three ladies to help us with this phase.

It was best to clean away all the sticky fluids, but no matter how long we washed, we couldn't get rid of them completely. The most efficient method was probably to wash it with salt, but salt wasn't cheap in this world. So we had to overcome this problem with brute force through numbers.

"Alright, let's use this chance to settle this part. Asuta, can you hold on to the front end and not let the water flow out?"

Tulu Dean gave clear instructions as she let in the water flowing between the rocks into the other end of the large intestines.

I blocked the other end as instructed, and the large intestine was filled with water, and the shape became like a large banana. Tulu Dean held on to the other end and scrubbed the entire length of the intestines.

She released the water, filled it again and repeated the procedure three times. She then used my knife and cut the large intestines into 10 cm chunks, turned them inside out, and scrubbed the exposed interior. Processing offal was tedious work.

When the five of us were finished with the large intestines, small intestines, and rectum, the beautiful pink and white chunks of meat were gathered in a small pile. In my mind, the offal had turned into an ingredient.

"Next will be this. Like the other organs, we will need to peel away this membrane first."

Tulu Dean picked up a palm-sized, bean-shaped organ.

There were two with the same shape, and the organs that came in pairs were either lungs or kidney. This was probably the latter. I peeled off the membrane on the surface, and the reddish and smooth organs below got revealed.

"Asuta, can you cut it open from the side?"

"Understood."

When I cut it open, white substance that was like fats flowed out.

“When we clean this organ, we would tear off this white part and dispose of it... It has some sort of stench.”

“I see.”

I remember the functions of a kidney was to filter the water in a body. So the poison inside a body was probably collected here.

I might not be familiar with offal, but I realized one thing. Tulu Dean probably liked tending to the hearth, that was why she had been showing such a happy face all the while.

The Tsun clan committed taboo by eating the grace of the forest, and it filled them with guilt. Their main house also ordered the branch house to “hunt only the minimal number of kiba”, so they had to cook even the offal from the killed kiba.

Tulu Dean who was just ten must have known that the rules of the Tsun clan were abnormal. The main house probably reminded them time and time again to not let the other houses discover this fact, or they would be scalped. That was why their eyes were like dead fish.

Despite experiencing such a past, I thought Tulu Dean still loved hearth tending and was very proficient in this job. She even considered “which parts to dispose of, in order to make a delicious meal”.

The denizens of Forest's Edge lived such simple lives that they couldn't permit the existence of delicious food. They thought that spending too much effort on cooking would be a waste, but some denizens still had the potential to cook a delicious meal.

In the Wu clan village, there already were proficient hearth caretakers; Leina Wu, Shela Wu, Mama Mia Lei and Tali Wu were all showing their talent in cooking. I thought Tulu Dean was the same type of person as them.

Although the hearth caretakers of the Tsun clan were closely related to the breaking of the taboo, they could manage the hearth in a correct manner now. This was probably the reason why they could smile so blissfully.

“There are two more organs. You can cut an opening here and wash away all the blood

inside."

Unaware of my thoughts, Tulu Dean took out the heart and liver.

"No matter how much we wash, there would still be blood inside. But it tastes better after washing..."

"You are right. This is why the men have to bloodlet the kiba after hunting them."

During these eight decades, the denizens of Forest's Edge had never thought about bloodletting. However, when the twisted rules of the Tsun clan forced them to consume offal which had a stronger stench than meat, they got closer to the truth that "blood is the reason behind the stench" in their pursuit to get rid of the smell. How ironic.

As I was thinking about that, I held the heart and Tulu Dean held the liver as we washed these organs in the stream and scrubbed them.

"The other parts can be washed with just water. We will fill the pot with water and rinse the organs there."

Despite her words, there weren't many organs left in the pot.

The lungs were in a light shade of pink, and the soft texture was incredible. There was also a long and thin organ covered in white fats. Through elimination, I guessed that was the pancreas. There was also a flat piece of meat, which was probably the diaphragm. I let Jass Dean and the others clean those organs.

"Well, that's quite a lot of work... Tulu Dean, how do you eat these offals?"

"We usually boil them. But the offal has a stronger stench than the meat. So, we would boil it together with lilo and an unknown herb..."

Tulu Dean's face turned gloomy. The denizens of Forest's Edge probably didn't know the name of this herb, since it was part of the grace of the forest they were forbidden to eat.

"You will only boil it? What about grilling them?"

"Ehh...? Yes... Grilling the offals won't remove the stench..."

“I see. But you are fine with offal, right?”

If she hated offal, she wouldn't go out of her way to declare that she had eaten it before. I didn't think she would bring up the twisted practices of the Tsun clan if she could help it.

“Yes... I don't particularly dislike offal in the past. How should I put it... I like the nommy texture of offal.”

<TL: くにゅくにゅ, or *kuniyu kuniyu*, made up noises>

“Nommy, what an interesting way of describing it.”

I intentionally answered cheerfully, and Tulu Dean's stern face turned red immediately as she lowered her head.

I felt a little bad about it, but this was better than letting her think about the past.

“Well then, I will let you try my way of cooking it. Don't worry, the nommy texture will still be there.”

After saying that joke, Tulu Dean who was washing the liver made angry tsundere noises and shouted “Enough already!”, and then bumped my chest with her shoulder.

Part 2

After washing the offal, we returned to the Fa house and got back to our work for the time being.

That wasn't because we were putting the offal on hold. I soaked the heart and liver in salt water and continued letting out its blood. Next, we added lilo into a pot of water and then lightly boiled the other offal. They were then added into marinating sauce made from myam, aria, and fruit wine.

After spending an hour to prepare the offal, my preparation for the tomorrow was delayed a lot. I quickly kneaded the patty of the [Kiba burger], sliced the meat for the [Myam-roasted meat], [Kiba braised meat] and [Kiba chitto], and finally finished my daily chores before dusk.

“Alright, let's start cooking the offal.”

We walked to the two outdoor stoves. One of them was used to cook the soup for dinner, and the other was preheating the griddle.

“Huh? Are you going to grill the offal?”

Tulu Dean opened her eyes wide in disbelief, and I nodded in return:

“That's right, with the seasoning available to the Fa house, grilling it will make it tastier. I will grill it with marinating sauce, similar to this [Myam-roasted meat].”

“You already boiled it just now, and you want to fry it again...”

The denizens of Forest's Edge didn't have the concept of pre-boiling food and seasoning them for grilling. They were surprised to see me do that. In my old world, the pork intestines used in Horumonyaki would be pre-boiled before it was cooked.

Expression “I thought” probably sounded unreliable, but my family seldom ate out, so just like shabu-shabu, I seldom got the chance to try offal dishes.

My dad was probably uninterested in offal dishes. Whenever a regular customer suggested adding offal hotpot to the menu, he always replied: “Maybe next time”.

Hence, I had to figure out the technique for cooking offal by myself. I didn't pre-boil the heart, liver and kidney, and just sliced them thinly before soaking them in the myam marinating sauce. The heart was called Hatsu, the liver was called Reba... What was kidney called again? I would probably never know.

The other offal were pre-boiled and cut into large chunks. They looked just like the pig offal I remembered from my old world. I decided to challenge the other offal next. I grabbed the offal dipped in red sauce and then tossed generous portions of it into the pot. The sweet aroma of the fruit wine and the garlic-like fragrance of the myam spread out in a burst of white smoke.

"Uwah, smells nice."

The Fou house women muttered happily.

"Asuta, thanks to you buying jerky from the Fou house, we have many copper plates to spare. We will try buying myam next time too."

"That's wonderful."

I continued using the spatula as I answered, careful to not let the offal burn. At this moment, Ai Fa poked her head over my shoulder.

"Hmm, that looks weird."

"But it smells good, right?"

"Isn't that the smell of myam?"

She was right.

How should I put this? Would the grilled kiba offal suit the taste of the denizens of Forest's Edge? When preparation work was complete, the marinating sauce did its job and masked any lingering stench, so everyone should find it palatable. But I didn't eat grilled offal too many times before, so I felt a little uneasy.

"Alright, the first battle is upon us."

I pushed the cooked offal to the edge of the griddle.

I then scooped them onto a plate with a spatula and handed it to Tulu Dean.

“Please have some. We are the ones who suggested cooking the offal, so we should taste it first.”

“...Alright.”

Tulu Dean took the plate with an uneasy expression. If it didn’t taste good, the work for the past hour would be wasted...

That was probably what she thought.

We should take responsibility together. I put some of the offal on my plate and shoved it into my mouth without hesitation.

The familiar sweet and tangy taste of the [Myam-roasted meat] spread in my mouth.

Next, I started chewing the offal, and the nommy texture Tulu Dean mentioned really soothed the mind. The texture of the offal felt like chicken skin, very chewy and hard to tear apart.

It wasn’t bad.

There wasn’t any stench.

By the way, which part did I just eat? It wasn’t thick, so it should be the intestine or rectum. The dish felt average to me.

“Tulu Dean, how is it?”

I shifted my gaze towards her.

Tulu Dean held the plate and spoon, and showed a blissful smile:

“It’s very delicious... much better than the offal I ate in the past.”

I see.

Offal possessed a subjective taste, and everyone had their own preference. As I thought about that, I ate a large piece of offal. I kept chewing it, and a different taste

spread in my mouth.

“Hmm? It tastes really good.”

“Isn’t that right? It’s delicious, huh?”

Tulu Dean’s smile broadened.

Why was that? I liked the chewy texture of this offal. The taste was more prominent than earlier, and I could feel the unique taste of kiba fat in this.

From its shape, I was probably eating a large intestine. It was amazingly delicious.

“Yes, it’s good. I can recommend this dish with confidence. Everyone, please try it too.”

As the amount was limited, I gave each house one plate of offal. The women from the Fou house took it timidly, while Tulu Dean filled another plate and handed it to Jass Dean with a smile.

I also offered my plate to my house head.

“...Is it really good?”

“It’s tasty. Well~, the taste of each part is different, but after trying some, you will find one that is exceptionally good.”

As I answered, I started grilling the heart and liver.

The liver looked exactly like a pig liver, so did the kidney and heart. The heart was much leaner though and looked closer to being lean meat.

While I was grilling the offal, I stole a glance at Ai Fa.

“How is it? It’s good, right?”

“Well, it’s not bad... But when can I swallow it?”

“To be frank, I don’t know either. Just chew it up adequately, I guess?”

As we were speaking, the heart and liver were done.

I tried fried pork liver with chives and chicken liver kebab before, but I wondered how this dish would taste. While Ai Fa was still chewing, I took the plate from her hand, scooped up the food in the griddle, and then tried the liver.

Hmm, yummy.

The taste of kiba liver was stronger than the chicken and pork liver I tried, but there wasn't any blood stench. We didn't prepare it too thoroughly, and the taste was very outstanding, which meant this was fine as a dish. I had never cooked offal before and had always tossed them away. I regretted doing that now.

The kidney had a similar texture to the liver. Even though the taste wasn't as strong as the liver, the taste was smoother and the texture softer.

Next was the heart... It was no different from normal meat. The heart looked like grilled lean meat, but more tender than thigh meat.

"Hmm; tastes great and is easier to swallow than the other offal. Ai Fa, want to try some?"

"What is this? Isn't it meat?"

"This is liver, that's a kidney, and over here is the heart. The liver's taste is more unique, but it's full of nutrition. The heart is as delicious as normal meat."

"The heart of a kiba..."

Ai Fa muttered a little uneasily and then tried the heart first.

"...It's delicious."

"Aren't I right?"

"Yes, it's delicious... Not just that, I can feel very strongly that I had consumed the life of a kiba."

Ai Fa seemed satisfied.

The others showed similar expressions.

And so, the six of us swiftly finished the samples. The rest of the offal would be the Fa house's dinner tonight.

The sampling session before dinner ended smoothly.

"How delicious... But the preparation is too tedious, right? The legs and torso meat are just as delicious, but they are much easier to prepare."

After the sampling session was over, Jass Dean told me her thoughts on behalf of the women.

"That's right, I think each house should decide for themselves whether they want to eat offal. The intestines are more troublesome to prepare, so eating just the heart and liver is another way... Tulu Dean, even if we cover the offal with Pico leaves, we can't preserve it for long, correct?"

"Yes. It can be kept for a few days, but we always finished it on the first day."

"As I expected. If time permits, the Fa house will eat all the offal. Since we learned how delicious offal is, I can't bear discarding them, furthermore... When we sell meat in the Post Station Town, the price of the meat will increase too."

Jass Dean and the others tilted their head puzzledly.

"Just a small kiba can cook such a large quantity of food, so a larger kiba will be able to provide one dinner for a family, right? After squeezing out one dinner, the excess meat can then be sold... Never mind, please don't worry too much about earning copper plates."

"I see... that's true..."

"Another thing, offal can only be eaten on the day the kiba is hunted. From that perspective, it is a meal presented to the hunters as a blessing for their bountiful harvest. That's the reason why I kept these parts to make these dishes."

The thinking for everyone was different, so I didn't plan to force my ideals on others.

"If there are no urgent matters, spending a bit more effort isn't a bad thing. The offal also contains different types of nutrients from normal meat, since their texture is different from them too."

“...I think the men will like kiba heart.”

Ai Fa said quietly.

“That must be food that hunters like. When I ate the heart, it felt as if the lifeforce of the kiba was flowing into my body, it felt really satisfying.”

“I see. Asuta of the Fa house, thank you for teaching us so much.”

Jass Dean said.

Jass Dean’s eyes might look stern, but she had a gentle expression on her face. She put her wrinkled hand on top of Tulu Dean’s head.

“The Dean house will cook offal in the future too. After all, Tulu Dean likes to eat it.”

Tulu Dean smiled with her face slightly red.

“The nommy taste is really good, right?”

“Enough already!”

I butted in, and Tulu Dean’s face turned even redder as she kept pounding my chest.

Under the icy glare of my house head, night slowly fell in the Forest's Edge.

Chapter 6

Wu Clan's Harvest Festival

Part 1

Blue month 27th.

On this day, the Wu clan village was scheduled to hold a harvest festival.

At the same time, our third stall lease term in the Post Station Town would end.

After closing the stall, we headed to the <Kimyusu's Tail Inn> as usual to return the cart, and I thanked the innkeeper Milano Mast:

“Milano Mast, I have been in your care... Sorry, but can you continue renting us the carts from tomorrow onwards?”

“I’m a businessman too; since you made a request, I have no reason to reject you.”

Milano Mast was checking the cart for damages and had a sour face as usual.

“You will continue working in the <Big Tree of the South Inn>, correct? You can just rent a cart from them and save the hassle of running all over the place.”

“No, it’s no hassle at all. If it isn’t too much trouble, I will want to continue the stall lease with your inn.”

I was a bit worried.

“The space rental and cart leasing fee aren’t much, right? How should I put this, I feel bad about all the trouble we caused you... Will it jeopardize your position if you continue to work with us?”

“What a naggy fellow, how much longer are you going to pester? I already told you plenty of times, that I would have thrown the lot of you out if you caused me any

trouble.”

Milano Mast turned to me after finishing his inspection and looked even more uneasy.

After that big incident with the Tsun clan, I didn’t sense much difference from Leito or Milano Mast. But Milano Mast’s eyes seemed less sharp nowadays and he spoke with us more often. Even such a minute change filled me with glee.

Speaking of which, it had been ten days since that commotion.

I couldn’t help feeling surprised.

The meeting between us and the castle people getting postponed to 30th of the Blue month might have played a part, but these ten days had been smooth sailing. Even though the Post Station Town residents still had reservations towards the denizens of Forest's Edge, and most of them looked at us with probing or dubious gazes, everything appeared peaceful on the surface.

The sales at the stall were stable, with about 140 portions sold every day, while the meals catered to the inn were all sold out. Could such a peaceful life continue... That would depend on the result of the meeting three days later.

“Enough about that for now. You are not taking a day off, and continuing tomorrow too? Normally, everyone will rest for a day at the end of the lease. You are not worried about money, right?”

Milano Mast crossed his muscular arms before his chest as he asked.

Money wasn’t an issue for us, of course. After setting up the stall for 30 days, our profits were 5,484 red copper plates.

5,484 red copper plates... That was roughly 457 kiba worth of tusks and horns.

Including the living expenses of the Fa house, we spent less than one hundred red copper plates a month. After buying the griddle, the kitchen knife, and the necklace for my house head, we didn’t buy any other big-ticket items. The expensive ingredients, Tau sauce and cheese, were just ten to twenty red copper plates.

I would be collecting the wagon I ordered tomorrow. Costing 1,200 red copper plates, this was the most expensive items I had purchased so far. After deducting that, we still

had 3,700 red copper plates on hand. We didn't need to worry about food or clothing now and were troubled by how best to utilize this money instead.

Even though my wallet was full, there was a reason why I didn't want to rest.

"To be honest, my regular patrons from the east and the south are about to leave Genos. So I don't plan to take a day off before they leave."

"The easterners and southerners, huh... By the way, I heard that you are selling food to an inn frequented by easterners too?"

"Yes. That inn is called the <Cryptic Venerable Inn>. The innkeeper is Neil."

"Ah, the inn run by that weirdo influenced by the eastern kingdom."

Milano Mast kept quiet after saying that.

He looked troubled for some reason.

Did he not get along with Neil from the <Cryptic Venerable Inn>? I felt a little worried about his reaction. But his mind seemed preoccupied with other thoughts.

"...May I know if there is anything wrong?"

Milano Mast seemed to realize something and glared at me with simmering eyes once again.

"It's nothing! Since the things are settled, go away. I have work to do."

"Sorry. I will be in your care from tomorrow onwards too."

He seemed to have something else in mind, but Milano Mast already went inside his warehouse, so I had to let the matter rest.

With the griddle, pot, ingredients and four women: Vena Wu, Shela Wu, Lala Wu, and Rii Sudora, we walked towards the entrance of the inn. At this moment, Kamyua Yost blocked the way leading outside.

"Hi, thank you for your hard work, Asuta. I appreciate the delicious lunch."

“Ah, thank you. It’s been a while since we last met.”

The last time I saw him was the day the Totos incident ended. It has been three days since then, although Leito did help him buy lunch at noon every day.

Kamyua Yost stood before us whimsically and showed his usual cheery smile.

“If possible, I want to eat your food while it’s hot, but I had been busy preparing for that meeting and opening communication channels. Malfreed can’t leave this city so easily because of his status, so I had to run around in his stead.”

Running around and opening channels for the sake of the meeting.

The one who requested postponing the meeting was Malfreed, not Pyschkurewuss. It seemed that they were doing some covert operations again.

“That must be tough. I hope opening all these channels isn’t a scheme against the denizens of Forest’s Edge.”

Kamyua Yost spread his arms in surprise.

“But why would we scheme against the denizens of Forest’s Edge? Our goal is to expose the Pyschkurewuss’ past crimes?”

“Sorry, the last part is just a joke. I had been showing my dark side unreservedly when talking to you. I will reflect on my actions.”

“No; if that is your nature, I will be happy to see that change in you.”

Kamyua Yost ruffled his blonde hair.

“Never mind, Asuta, I have something to ask you... Is dinner in the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> tonight grilled meat or hotpot?”

“What? It’s hotpot tonight.”

What about it?

“I see, thanks. I will have dinner at the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> tonight. If they served the same dish every day, I would just need to take turns visiting the <Cryptic Venerable

Inn> and <Big Tree of the South Inn> for dinner. But now, I have to worry about this every day.”

“Ehh? You have your dinner at the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> and <Big Tree of the South Inn>? Don’t you stay in the <Kimyusu’s Tail Inn>?”

“Yes, but I can eat western dishes everywhere else, so I want to eat your kiba dish while I’m in Genos.”

Kamyua Yost smiled cheerfully again.

“There are many like me too. The <Cryptic Venerable Inn> and <Big Tree of the South Inn> are crowded during dinner hours. There are many westerners there too, and not all of them lodge in that inn. I even saw a few easterners at the <Big Tree of the South Inn> yesterday.”

“Thank you for your patronage... But you are a regular in the <Kimyusu’s Tail Inn>, right? Won’t that cause friction between you and Milano Mast?”

“The customers have the right to decide where to eat dinner. Milano Mast is not a petty man; he won’t get angry over such trivial matters... It’s not good to say this, but the dinner quality in the <Kimyusu’s Tail Inn> isn’t high. As you know, Milano Mast lost his wife when he was young, and his daughter didn’t have the chance to learn to cook. Even if the other inns didn’t provide kiba dishes, I would still eat elsewhere.”

“...Kamyua Yost, I’m still not as mean as you.”

I didn’t understand how he could joke about Milano Mast’s circumstances so lightly. Furthermore, Milano Mast’s wife died young because of the Tsun clan’s treachery.

“And so? Are you trying to coerce me into catering for the <Kimyusu’s Tail Inn> and teach Milano Mast or his daughter to cook too?”

“I have no intention of coercing you. But if I can eat kiba dishes at this inn, I won’t need to make a trip to another inn, which will be less of a hassle.”

“...I still don’t know if the denizens of Forest’s Edge can form a cordial relationship with the people in the Genos castle, so I can’t drag Milano Mast in recklessly.”

“Then it’s fine to drag in the <Cryptic Venerable Inn> and <Big Tree of the South Inn>?”

“Their circumstances are different from Milano Mast. Milano Mast is related to that incident a decade ago.”

I tried to cool down my head that was almost boiling and continued:

“I really want to repay Milano Mast’s kindness, but this will have to wait after the meeting in three days ends... I don’t think you are that vicious, but you won’t endanger Milano Mast for the sake of forcing Pyschkurewuss into a corner, right?”

“Do I look that cold and heartless? I set my sights on Pyschkurewuss and the Tsun clan for the sake of avenging Milano Mast and Leito in the first place, so I won’t get my priorities wrong... Don’t tell anyone, but there are three *<guardians>* lodging in the *<Kimyusu’s Tail Inn>*. I did everything I could to stop Pyschkurewuss from reaching his claws here.”

“Tell me the important details before you joke next time. Will Milano Mast be in any danger? Should I sign my contract with the *<Big Tree of the South Inn>* instead?”

“No, Pyschkurewuss won’t target Milano Mast. Milano Mast might be related to that incident a decade ago, but the hunter’s necklace clutched in the hand of his brother-in-law had already been submitted to the guards as evidence... By the way, if Milano Mast had any value as a witness, Malfreed would already have convicted the Tsun clan and Pyschkurewuss of their crimes.”

“In that case, why did you ask the *<guardians>* to guard him? If there isn’t any danger, you don’t need to be so cautious, right?”

“I’m just covering all the bases. If anything happens to Milano Mast, even I won’t be able to smile so cheerfully.”

Kamyua Yost still had the pretentious smile on his face, but the light in his purple eyes was wavering as he tried to conceal his emotions.

“Don’t worry, just do whatever you wish. If I can eat kiba dishes in the *<Kimyusu’s Tail Inn>*, I will be overjoyed, you know?”

“You are only asking for your own convenience, right? Besides, Milano Mast won’t be interested in learning to cook from someone like me.”

“Who knows? Going by his stubborn character, even if he harbors such thoughts, he

won't mention it to you proactively.”

After hearing him say that, I felt more worried about Milano Mast's silence just now. Milano seemed to be suppressing his emotions back then.

I sighed softly and shifted my gaze towards Kamyua Yost's whimsical eyes.

“Anyway, this will have to wait after the meeting ends smoothly three days later. No matter what, I can't take on any more jobs before the end of the Blue month.”

“Alright, alright. I will do my small part to guide things towards a better ending... Ah, can you keep that thing regarding the <guardians> a secret? If Milano Mast learns about it, he might think I'm meddling too much and chase them all out.”

Kamyua Yost didn't reveal any other emotions and kept smiling as usual.



“Ah, really now! You always talk so long, it's already so late now!”

As we walked along a small path flanked by trees inside Forest's Edge, Lala Wu complained angrily.

I watched her red ponytail sway like the tail of a horse and answered: “Don't we usually return at this time too?”

“It's fine if there is nothing else going on, but today is the harvest festival! The men from the kin houses should have gathered by now and started their test of might!”

“Ehh? The festival is already starting when the day is still so bright?”

“The feast will only start at dusk! How can we eat before the hunters finish their competition!? I can't even, you don't know anything!”

It was true that I didn't know anything about the harvest festival. Only the bigger houses could host a harvest festival, so I didn't learn much even after asking Ai Fa about it.

Never mind, Donda Wu only asked me to prepare dinner for the winner of the contest, everything else didn't concern me. By the way, why was Lala Wu so anxious to return

to her village?

“...For men, the test of might during a harvest festival is an important moment. For the unwed women, this is an important ceremony to choose a husband...”

Vena Wu whispered to me as she carried a large sack of food.

Her answer didn't dispel my doubts.

“Lala Wu is just thirteen and can't marry yet, right? This should have nothing to do with her.”

“I'm not too sure... Maybe there is a boy that she likes...?”

If there was someone that Lala Wu liked, she probably would want to witness his important moment.

At this point, I finally figured it out. I was really dense.

“Just to confirm, as a hearth caretaker, I won't be dragged into the contest, correct?”

“Hmm...? Since we invited you to the festival, you probably can join in if you want to...”

“Definitely not.”

There wasn't even a one in a million chance for me to win against a man from Forest's Edge. No matter what competition it was, I could only compete with Leina Wu or Lala Wu at the most. To be honest, I might be weaker than Vena Wu.

“Enough about that, Asuta... Do you not get along with that man...?”

“Huh? You mean Kamyua Yost? Not really.”

“Is that so...? But you looked angry just now...”

I thought I showed my poker face back then, but Vena Wu saw right through me.

“It's really nothing, he said something that made me a little unhappy. When I'm facing that Kamyua who loves pretending to be retarded, I will try to be honest and not hide my thoughts and feelings. Or else, it will be hard to make him do the same.”

“Really... What a pain...”

Vena Wu seemed uninterested as she shrugged sexily.

After walking for 40 to 50 minutes along the steep slope, we returned to the Forest's Edge.

Following the widening path that led to the north, we saw the Wu clan village in no time. We bade Rii Sudora farewell at a short distance from the Wu clan village, took over the ingredients she was carrying for us, and stepped into the plaza that was rowdier than usual...

I was stunned.

The Wu clan village was more crowded than I imagined. Of the one hundred Wu clan kins members, more than half of them were gathered here.

Most of them were young, with equal parts of both genders. There were almost no signs of the elderly and children. People formed a wall around the plaza and kept cheering... At this moment, a large man was in an intense battle with Ai Fa in the middle of the crowd.

“A-Ai Fa, what are you doing!”

Cheers from the crowd drowned out my shout. The youth from the Wu clan were hyped from their battle and cheering loudly.

Ai Fa and her opponent were both unarmed. They didn't have any blades on their waist or cape on their shoulders. This made Ai Fa's situation look very dire.

Ai Fa's opponent was a hulk as tall as Mida. Standing over two meters tall and weighing more than a hundred kg, he had long limbs and a thick chest and was built like a bull. This imposing giant was reaching out his long arms in an attempt to grab Ai Fa.

Ai Fa possessed extraordinary physical abilities so she wouldn't be caught so easily. She just kept jumping left and right to evade that man's fingertips, showing no intention to strike back. Ai Fa might be skilled, but the size difference between them was too big; it was reckless of her to duel with such a man without any weapons.

“What is going on!? Why isn't anyone stopping this commotion!?”

“Ehh... But we can’t interfere with a hunter’s contest of might...”

Vena Wu looked at me in surprise.

“Contest of might? This is a contest of might? Isn’t this just a brawl? Besides, why is Ai Fa competing!?”

“How would I know... Don’t worry, hurting the opponent is a taboo...”

Hurting the opponent is a taboo?

The hulk continued waving his bear-like arms in pursuit of Ai Fa. Just one swipe would shatter bones.

“I can’t watch any longer! I will stop them!”

“Ahh, you can’t...”

Vena Wu was about to stop me when a cheer loud enough to shake the forest erupted.

I hurriedly shifted my gaze towards the two contestants; the griddle in my hand was almost falling off. Ai Fa who was backpedaling got tripped by a pothole and fell.

The hulk immediately closed in.

It was over.

Compared to that man, Ai Fa was so thin and fragile. I could imagine Ai Fa being sent flying and almost cried out in despair.

However... the off-balanced Ai Fa didn’t try to right herself up and kicked her right leg high instead.

When the hulk drew near, her toes touched his shoulder.

Ai Fa used the momentum of the hulk to jump further backward.

She wasn’t just jumping, she turned backward in midair, touched the ground with her right palm momentarily, and did a backflip— before landing perfectly.

The cheers were so loud that it shook the very air.

The hulk roared and smashed at Ai Fa with his head.

He closed the 7 to 8 meters gap in an instant.

He was about to grab Ai Fa.

Before his thick fingers reached Ai Fa's breasts, Ai Fa suddenly vanished.

She had lowered her entire body.

While doing so, Ai Fa extended her right leg to her side and swung it backward. This was like the leg sweep often seen in kung-fu movies.

Ai Fa's right leg kicked the hulk's right ankle, making him fall backward.

She then stood up quickly, while that man hurriedly propped up his upper body.

“The match is over!”

At the same time, a sharp voice cut through the heated atmosphere.

“Winner, Ai Fa of the Fa house. Jii Mamu of the Mamu house, please leave the arena.”

Claps and cheers overwhelmed the stern voice.

The hulk roared with rage as he smashed his fists onto the ground.

“Amazing! She beat up Jii Mamu! Jii Mamu is a brave who can fight Darum-nii on equal footing!”

Lala Wu squealed excitedly.

I almost collapsed onto the ground with the griddle in my arms but somehow found my footing.

And then, Ai Fa walked towards us with thunderous applause.

“You are finally back. Asuta, why are you so late?”

“I-I’m not late at all! What were you doing!?”

“Why are you so loud? It’s a contest of might.”

Even though she had just been through an intense match, Ai Fa didn’t break a sweat.

“I had never heard of harvest festivals, but I’m familiar with the contest of might since I was young. Compared to my father Gill, that man wasn’t much at all.”

“Even so, you shouldn’t act so dangerously, right? We are the guests of the Wu clan here!”

“I didn’t intend to contest, but since he challenged me, I had a match with him.”

When Ai Fa was about to pout unhappily, she seemed to notice the gaze of Lala Wu and the others and kept a straight face.

“Ai Fa, I’m really surprised that you defeated Jii Mamu. You are a really capable hunter.”

Shela Wu who was carrying a pot together with Lala Wu mediated between for us.

“Asuta, the test of might between hunters is also called Battle of Skill. The rules forbid harming the opponent. The hunters can’t use weapons, and have to win by using strength and skills to overcome their opponent, forcing their body to touch the ground... I don’t like seeing the violent side of men either, but the Battle of Skill is not a dangerous brawl.”

Shela Wu’s voice was calm and steady and had the effect of soothing one’s heart.

The unease in my heart caused me to admonish Ai Fa. I reflected on my actions and scratched my head.

“That was my bad, I shouldn’t have yelled at you so suddenly... You will be helping me later, right? Or do you prefer to participate in this Battle of Skill?”

“I already told you that I didn’t join this competition willingly. That Jii Mamu said that a woman shouldn’t be a hunter and challenged me to a contest. Since he went that far, I couldn’t back down either and showed him my prowess as a hunter.”

Ai Fa shrugged.

“I will help tend to the hearth as promised. The kiba I carried over from our home is hanging right there.”

“Ehh? Did you hunt a kiba today too? That’s two days in a row.”

“When your luck comes, you can hunt as many as you want. And I didn’t use [Sacrificial hunting method].”

Ai Fa declared pre-emptively.

After her wounds recovered, her body was in top condition. Seeing how dependable my house head was, I couldn’t help but sigh.

“I understand, thank you. Well then, let’s start the preparations.”

“Yes.”

Ai Fa nodded seriously and then leaned her face towards mine. In order to keep Vena Wu and the others from seeing her face, she subtly adjusted the position she was standing in.

“Asuta, you really are a worrywart, a man of that level can’t best me.”

“That’s true...”

“No need to explain. You are worried about me, and I don’t blame you for that. It’s been a long time since I had a contest of might, so I felt like enjoying myself and didn’t turn him down... Please, forgive me.”

Ai Fa showed her white teeth with a smile from close up.

After seeing her smile, who would be able to pick any fault with her? I sighed again.

Part 2

We were assigned to the stove room in the Shin Wu's house today.

Donda Wu only asked me to prepare the meat dish for the winner of the competition, so that wasn't an issue. Everyone else should be preparing dinner in the stove room of the other houses, under the direction of Mia Lei Wu.

Including the men participating in the competition and the women watching them, there were 70-odd people gathered here. That was how grand the harvest festival was.

With the sun high in the sky, the Wu clan village was like a simmering cauldron. After Ai Fa's match with Jii Mamu was over, the hunters continued comparing their strength and skills in the center of the plaza. We looked at the wall of people surrounding the hunters and walked toward the Shin Wu house.

"Ah, Shin Wu! What are you doing here?"

Lala Wu said excitedly. Shin Wu and his house member Mida were sitting side by side at the entrance.

Shin Wu looked up at Lala Wu. He seemed a little down as he sat beside the panting Mida.

"I'm not doing anything. This is my house, so it's not strange for me to be here."

"I'm not asking about that... Did you lose already?"

"Yes. I still can't win against Ludo Wu."

"How retarded! Why are you always challenging the same person? Despite how Ludo looks, he is one of the top hunters amongst our kins! You can definitely win easily if you pick another opponent."

It seemed that the contest used a knock out system. In that case, Ai Fa would be obligated to participate in the next round of battle too. I was a little worried.

However, the main characters right now were Lala Wu and Shin Wu.

“...I haven’t won against Ludo Wu yet, so there’s no point in challenging others.”

“It can’t be helped then. But can you not be so depressed?”

“I’m not depressed.”

“Yes, you are! There is glory in winning the test of might, but there is no shame in losing too! So just keep your head up and enjoy the festival!”

After Shin Wu turned dumbfounded because of Lala Wu’s words, he glanced at Mida.

“What about you? It looks like you entered the match too, right?”

“Yes... Mida worked hard too...”

The sweaty Mida looked towards me with ragged breath.

“Asuta... If Mida wins all the test of might contests, Mida can taste your cooking, right...?”

“Yes, that is the plan.”

“Mida is working hard... Mida can eat your cooking after winning four more people...”

“Ehh? You already won against two people? Amazing!”

Instead of admiration, Lala Wu appeared more surprised.

I didn’t really know the rules of the contest. After asking Lala Wu, I learned that the hunters had to fight many rounds. After winning the three preliminary rounds, the winner of the actual tournament will be crowned champion. The preliminary rounds were a random round robin affair, the first eight hunters who win three matches would qualify for the main tournament. Hunters who lost twice would be knocked out, so this was a survival competition where the ones who won three matches first could progress to the next stage. The tournament utilized a single match knockout system, and the person who won three matches would be champion. The preliminary matches might seem haphazard, but this was a system to pick the eight elites from the pool of 30 to 40 contestants.

By the way, Donda Wu and Dan Lutim already defeated three people. It was the nature

of the denizens of Forest's Edge to challenge the strong right from the start.

Jiza Wu, Ludo Wu, Kaslan Lutim, and the other strong contestants also won two rounds. Lala Wu was surprised that Mida was on par with these elites.

"If you keep winning, you will need to defeat Papa Donda and Dan Lutim. That's not an easy feat, so work hard."

"Yes... Mida will work hard..."

Mida's cheeks kept trembling.

Lala Wu nodded at Mida and then turned towards Shin Wu.

"And so? Have you given up? You just need to win three matches to become an elite eight, you know?"

"I didn't give up, I'm just charging up my power!"

I didn't know if he was telling the truth, but he stood up with determination.

"The others should have won their second match by now. I should go now so that I won't fall behind."

"Yes! Do your best!"

Lala Wu showed a satisfied smile.

But after Shin Wu left, she lowered her gaze a little worriedly. Thinking that I should make up for my dense reaction earlier, I said nonchalantly:

"Well then, let's watch Shin Wu strut his stuff. There is still time anyway."

"Huh?"

Lala Wu looked at me with her eyes wide open.

"Can we afford to take things so easily? Don't you have to prepare the food for tomorrow's business too?"

“You will be helping me later, right? Then I can finish it up easily.”

“You are too relaxed! If you serve any weird dish, Papa Donda will throw you out, you know?”

Despite Lala Wu’s words, her eyes were sparkling.

And so, we put the luggage we were carrying onto the floor and walked towards the human wall. At this moment, a tall figure blocked our path.

It was a lean youth who was half a head taller than me. This wild wolf-like youth was the second son of the Wu clan main house, Darum Wu.

“Ah, Darum-nii! When did you come back!? Thank you for the flower you gave me earlier!”

“Don’t mention it. The members of the Jean house will be surveilling the Tsun clan village, so I can finally come back.”

Darum Wu said to the rowdy Lala Wu and nodded to the quietly smiling Vena Wu, and then shifted his sharp gaze towards me... specifically speaking, to Ai Fa beside me.

“Head of the Fa house, Ai Fa, I challenge you to the test of might.”

“Hmm?... Sorry, I have to help tend to the hearth. Besides, I’m not a kin of the Wu clan, so I shouldn’t act too arrogantly here.”

“Are you going to ignore my challenge and run? Instead of showing your prowess as a hunter, are you placing more priority on working at the hearth? In that case, stop calling yourself a hunter and just tend to your hearth.”

Darum Wu said in a low voice and then walked towards us.

A deep scar went right across his right cheek, and his serious face leaned right into Ai Fa’s ears.

“If you win, I swear that I will acknowledge you as a hunter and won’t mock you ever again... If I win, you have to join the Wu clan.”

As I was standing right beside Ai Fa, I was probably the only other person who heard

that.

Ai Fa glared at Darum Wu from close range and then answered in a suppressed tone:

“What will happen to Asuta then?”

“If you wish to, I can persuade my dad and let that hearth caretaker join the Wu clan too. You won’t have any complains now, right?”

Under the troubled gaze of his elder sister and a puzzled look of his younger sister, Darum Wu quickly left Ai Fa’s side.

“If you possess the honor of a hunter, accept my challenge. If you flee, I will never see you as a hunter”

Darum Wu walked towards the center of the plaza.

Ai Fa sighed softly, and I grabbed her arm when she was about to stride forth.

“Hey, are you going to agree with his one-sided proposal?”

“Since he questioned my honor as a hunter, I can’t run away... That second son must have resolved himself when he said that.”

“Even so...”

“Besides, the Wu clan is now the tribal chief clan of the Forest's Edge. If we don’t form proper bonds with them, it might affect other people around us too. I think this is a good chance to improve my relationship with the second son.”

Ai Fa’s eyes were calm and steady, and the light of determination shone from the depths of her eyes.

“My relationships with the head, the eldest son, and the second son of the Wu clan main house aren’t too good. But thanks to your efforts, the clan head Donda Wu has eased up a lot. That’s why I want to form proper bonds with the second son.”

Ai Fa showed a strong and quiet smile.

And then... I wasn’t sure if she did so unconsciously, but her fingers grasped the blue

stone necklace.

“Since we are battling on equal terms, you don’t have to worry about me losing to the second son. Just watch me.”

Ai Fa left.

“Hi, you guys are back.”

At this moment, Ludo Wu walked over nimbly.

“Darum-nii is with Ai Fa right now. Are they going to battle?”

“Seems like it. No matter how good Ai Fa is, I don’t think she can defeat Darum-nii.”

When he heard Lala Wu’s words, Ludo Wu grunted and flicked back her yellowish-brown hair.

“Alright then, I will just find another opponent. Even if we leave these two alone, they will still make it to the next round.”

“Ludo Wu! If Ai Fa and Darum Wu compete, who will win?”

I couldn’t suppress the unease in my heart and asked.

Ludo Wu shrugged and answered

“How would I know? In a test of might, even the strong might lose because of a tiny mistake. Unless there is a deep gulf in prowess, of course.”

“...Who is stronger, Ai Fa or Darum Wu?”

When he heard my rude question, Ludo Wu made a funny face at me.

“Who will tell you such things? Hey, Shin Wu is up next.”

Like what Ludo Wu said, Shin Wu and an unfamiliar youth entered the central plaza.

Ai Fa and Darum Wu stood quietly behind the tall old man who was acting as the referee—the former head of the Lutim house, Raa Lutim. They were the next pair of

contestants.

"Hmm, that's the youngest son of the Min house. Maybe Shin Wu can win... Huh? What's wrong, Shela Wu? Shin Wu is competing right now, you know?"

Ludo Wu's words surprised me, and I turned towards Shela Wu.

Shela Wu didn't seem to notice Ludo Wu calling out to her. She wasn't looking at her brother with teary eyes, but the two behind him.

At this moment, Shin Wu fended off the attacks from the youngest son of the Min house and subdued him. Basked in heated gazes and cheers, Ai Fa and Darum Wu walked to the middle of the plaza.

"To my right, Darum Wu of the Wu clan. To my left, Ai Fa of the Fa house. Show us your honor as hunters."

Even with the cheers coming from all around him, Raa Lutim's voice was still loud and clear as he announced the names of the two contestants.

Ai Fa and Darum Wu stood about five meters apart and faced each other.

Their height difference was half-a-head, and the weight difference was more than 10 kg. Even though Darum Wu was leaner than a normal man, Ai Fa was even skinnier than him.

Could Ai Fa really win against him?

You lose if your torso touches the ground; because of the simplicity of this rule, body build and muscle power weren't enough to ensure victory. However, I thought Ai Fa was better matched against a hulk like Jii Mamu.

This example might sound extreme, but if the opponent was Mida, I believed Ai Fa could definitely win. Even Vena Wu could trip Mida if she had a krilee stick.

However, what if the opponent was Darum Wu? They were different because of their genders, but I thought Ai Fa and Darum Wu had a similar style. Both of them had the body as taut as a whip, sharp like steel, long slender limbs and possessed agility and tenacity... From their body build alone, Ludo Wu and Shin Wu were closer to Ai Fa, but on the whole, I thought Ai Fa was more similar to Darum Wu.

Although their type was similar, Darum Wu was one size bigger than Ai Fa. Such an opponent was probably difficult to deal with. An example would be a fight between two boxers whose weight classes were more than 10 kg apart.

When a boxer fought with a sumo wrestler, some battles would favor the contestant with a smaller build. The same applied when a boxer got matched up against a wrestler or a karate practitioner. The rules of the match would become the deciding factor, not the size of the fighter.

However, the rules for the test of might contest didn't pose any disadvantage to both parties. Mida and the others might be hindered by these rules, but that didn't apply to Darum Wu.

What did Ai Fa think about her chances of winning?

As I was lowering my head troubling over that, Raa Lutim announced the start of the match.

“Begin!”

Darum Wu lowered his stance a little.

Ai Fa did the same.

I was about ten meters from the middle of the plaza, but I could feel the intense bestial fire burning in their eyes. It was like a wolf and a lynx howling and staring down each other.

In a blink of an eye, Darum Wu reached out with his right arm.

Ai Fa swiftly jumped to the outer side of his arm.

Before Ai Fa could close in, Darum Wu quickly turned to face her.

Their agility was about the same.

However, their arm strength was different because of their body build. How would Ai Fa find a path to victory?

If this was really a duel between a wolf and a lynx, the one that injured the weak point

of the other party, such as the eyes or throat would win. But this contest forbade the use of such attack which could overcome the difference in body build.

Darum Wu carefully punched and kicked, and Ai Fa fended him off. With Darum Wu one-sided attacks, time passed by slowly.

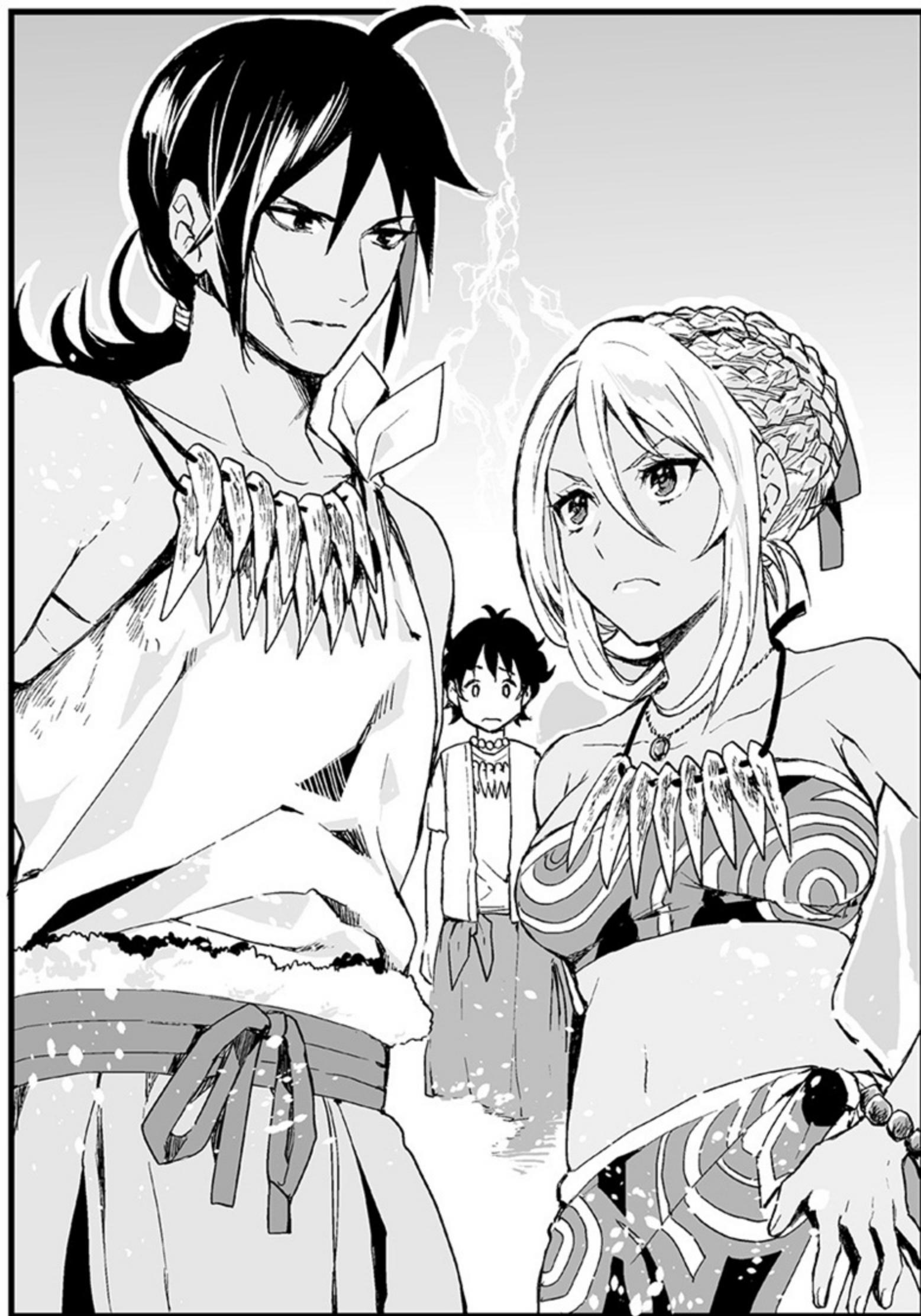
Before I knew it, the crowd had gone quiet. These two seemed to have infected the crowd with their tense atmosphere.

And then... the situation changed suddenly.

Ai Fa who was on the defensive suddenly charged into Darum Wu's chest, her bold move felt a little reckless.

She lowered her head and attempted to headbutt Darum Wu's stomach. Darum Wu twisted his body nimbly and tried to hit Ai Fa's neck with his right elbow.

Ai Fa seemed to be able to see behind her, and she lowered her body even more to dodge the elbow strike. She then went around her opponent's right side, and her arm reached Darum Wu's back.



Ai Fa's fingers grabbed the back of Darum Wu's shirt.

"Ughh!?"

Darum Wu sneered angrily and then threw his right elbow towards Ai Fa behind him.

Ai Fa started moving too; she kept the same distance from Darum Wu, staying right behind him, so Darum Wu's attack missed.

Ai Fa's other hand also grabbed the back of Darum Wu's shirt, with both hands grabbing the spots close to his shoulders. Their position was strange, like a centipede fight of sorts.

"What kind of joke is this! Fight me fair and square!"

Darum Wu yelled as he swung his elbow and roared at Ai Fa again.

From his position and angle, it was impossible for his attack to reach.

"Attacking the weak point is also a proper tactic."

With these words, Ai Fa turned around.

Her fingers were still grabbing Darum Wu's shirt.

When she turned around, her right leg kicked at Darum Wu's left heel, making him lose balance. Ai Fa then bent over, and Darum Wu's feet were airborne.

Darum Wu's waist stuck closely to Ai Fa's waist, and he flipped over backward and landed on his head.

Was this a back against back over shoulder throw? What a strange and terrifying technique. If this was a judo match, the referee would never allow such a move.

But they weren't in a judo match; instead, it was the contest of might. Hence, Raa Lutim declared Ai Fa the victor.

"The match is over! Winner, Ai Fa of the Fa house! Darum Wu of the Wu clan, please leave the arena."

Darum Wu managed to protect his head with his arms at the last moment, but he seemed to have a mild head concussion. He was groaning on the ground with his hands on his head.

Cheers erupted like a dam breaking. Ai Fa stood quietly in place for a moment and then finally squatted down beside Darum Wu with a worried face.

And then, Darum Wu's right arm sprung out like a snake and grabbed Ai Fa's left shoulder.

I was feeling relieved but stood up quickly in reaction.

But Darum Wu didn't do anything else. He just laid on the ground while grabbing Ai Fa's shoulder, and stared at Ai Fa's face.

"Oh, he got utterly beaten by you! Darum Wu, you still alive?"

Someone walked towards us with large strides with those cheerful words. It was the head of the Lutim house, Dan Lutim, whom I had not seen in a long while.

After the house head conference, Kaslan Lutim became an advisor to the tribal chief Donda Wu and had to run all over the place. And so, Dan Lutim took on the responsibility of protecting his own house and the rest of the kin houses. Hence, Ai Fa and I had not seen him for half a month.

After half a month, he was still the same. His face was like a cheery Arabian demon god, with a bold, innocent, and happy smile.

"Aside from Donda Wu and me, I never thought that there is someone who can throw Darum Wu down like this! What an interesting match! Ai Fa, hurry up and win another match and then test your might against me."

As Dan Lutim spoke, he reached his arm under Darum Wu's left armpit and easily picked him up. Darum Wu was heaved onto Dan Lutim's round body, and his hand finally left Ai Fa's shoulder.

"No, I don't want to disrupt the Wu clan's festival any further. I still need to tend to the hearth, so I have to go now."

Ai Fa said as she stood up, and Dan Lutim replied with a hearty laugh:

“You can’t do that! Amongst the hunting kins of the Wu clan, Darum Wu is one of the elites. Since you won against him convincingly, I must see the full extent of your abilities, or I won’t be able to enjoy this festival!”

“But...”

“This is a harvest festival, right? It’s a ritual where the hunters celebrate our harvest and display our might to the forest! Hearth caretakers have their job, while hunters have theirs! You are an outstanding hunter, so you just need to perform your duty as one!”

After that, Dan Lutim refused to listen to Ai Fa’s objections and returned to the wall of people with Darum Wu on his shoulders.

Deafening cheers surrounded Ai Fa again as she returned victoriously.

“...Thank you for your hard work. No matter what, I feel relieved.”

Ai Fa just sighed without answering.

A small figure approached us quietly from behind and jumped onto Ai Fa’s back.

“Ai Fa, you are amazing! Not just Jii Mamu, you even defeated Darum-nii! You are so cool!”

“...You are heavy; Rimee Wu, don’t cling to me.”

“Don’t wanna.”

Rimee Wu rubbed her cheeks against Ai Fa’s with a brilliant smile.

I remembered something that worried me at this moment and looked Shela Wu’s way.

Shela Wu closed her eyes tightly as she clasped her hands before her breasts with her face in desperate prayer.

Part 3

“Alright then, let’s start cooking.”

Everyone returned to the stove room in Shin Wu’s house.

The participants were the members helping with the stall, Vena Wu, Shela Wu and Lala Wu.

After that, Shin Wu lost his next battle to Jii Mamu who challenged him and got knocked out of the competition with one win and two losses. After watching his intense battle, we started preparing dinner.

I was worried about Ai Fa who was still in the tournament, but since her battle with Darum Wu ended without incident, I could only pray that there won’t be any accidents.

“Let’s start with the preparation work for offal, their freshness is the most important factor.”

The pot by my feet was filled with the kiba offal from Ai Fa’s hunt today. Since Ai Fa wasn’t here, I performed my first evisceration in a long while.

I already planned for this in advance. If Ai Fa hunted a kiba today and bloodlet it properly, I would prepare this dish for everyone.

We carried the kiba to the stream behind the village. This was downstream of the water source used by the main house. This river meandered around the east of the Wu clan village. I guess the Wu clan settled here because of this beautiful river. Eighty years ago, when the denizens migrated to Forest’s Edge, the Wu clan was already a powerful house.

Upon reaching the water source, I taught the Wu clan women the washing method I just learned yesterday. With their great cooking skills, they cleaned the bloodied offal in no time.

“Please remember the color of the organs. When kiba falls ill, the color of its organs will turn strange. Eating them will result in serious food poisoning, so just return it to the forest if they make you feel uneasy.”

“Hmmp, what a pain... Is the offal of the kiba so delicious, that people are willing to spend so much effort on it...?”

“Everyone has different preference. Those who like it will love it, while the opposite is also true.”

When we came back to the Shin Wu house, Shin Wu and Ryada Wu were waiting for us in front of the stove room.

“Asuta, if you need to skin the kiba, we can help.”

“Ehh? Don’t you need to watch the competition?”

“The eight braves have been decided, and the competition will stop for a short break. I’m not a hunter, so that ceremony has nothing to do with me in the first place.”

Ryada Wu answered.

Father and son resembled each other; both of them had long dark brown hair, high corner eyes that looked like a Semu, and quiet expression. Shin Wu would definitely become a calm and mature man in the future.

“Thank you, Ryada Wu... Ah, Shin Wu, did Ai Fa progress to the next round?”

“Yes. A man from the Lei house challenged her and lost. She also defeated Darum Wu and Jii Mamu and deserves to be called a brave... By the way, she wanted me to relay to you that she apologizes for not being able to help with the hearth during rest time. Rimee Wu dragged her to Jiba Wu’s chambers, so she had to go.”

After hearing Ai Fa’s message, Shin Wu was worried that we won’t have enough help and came here together with Ryada Wu. Including Shela Wu, I was very much indebted to this family.

“Can you tell me who else are left? Aside from Papa Donda, Dan Lutim and Ai Fa, are Jiza-nii and Kaslan Lutim in the tournament too?”

Shin Wu nodded at Lala Wu’s question.

“The other three are Ludo Wu, Rau Lei, and Mida.”

“Ehh~, Mida actually qualified!? How cocky! Hmm, Jii Mamu didn’t make it?”

“Yes, Mida defeated him.”

Lala Wu opened her arms and yelled again: “How cocky!”

Shela Wu who looked dejected for a while said timidly.

“Then... Is Darum Wu alright?”

“I didn’t see him, but he should be fine. If he got hurt, Ai Fa would be disqualified and someone else would become one of the eight braves... But Darum Wu only lost once, and he went home without challenging anyone else.”

“I see...”

Shela Wu sighed sorrowfully.

Shin Wu looked at her for a moment and then shifted his gaze back to me.

“Well then, let’s start our work. Is the kiba inside this room?”

“Ah, please wait! I need to do something before you skin it.”

I placed the pot full of offal back into the stove room, picked up the necessary tools, and followed Shin Wu and the others to the slaughterhouse.

“Hold on a bit.”

A 60-kg kiba that was one size bigger than yesterday was strung up in the middle of the room.

We took the eviscerated kiba down and placed it on a platform and then painted the oil I brought from the Fa house only on its right hind leg.

“Asuta, what are you going to do?”

“It might be a bit of a waste, but I want to burn off the fur from this leg.”

As both father and son fell into puzzled silence, I used the Rana grass to lit a stick and

moved the fire near the kiba hind leg. The dark-colored fur smeared with oil started to burn, and the mix of stenches coming from blood and burning fur gave off a terrible smell.

If I burned it too much, the skin would get scorched too. So after burning as much fur as I could without harming the skin, I doused the flame with water and was done.

“Alright then, before skinning it, can you cut off its right hind leg? I plan to use it to make a dish tonight.”

Parent and child probably had plenty of questions, but they didn’t ask anything. Be it good or bad, the two silent men wouldn’t comment on the work in the stove room.

“After cutting off the right hind leg, can it be skinned as usual?”

“Yes, thank you. I still need to prepare the food for my stall, so you will be a big help.”

After thanking the quiet father and son, I returned triumphantly with my prize.

“Uwah~, what is that?”

Lala Wu, the girl who was not quiet at all, asked me.

“As you can see, it’s the leg of a kiba. I just burned off its fur. The next steps will be much easier now.”

Before that, we had to take care of the offal.

I marinated the chopped offal in a liquid made from myam, fruit wine, and Tau sauce, and buried the heart, liver, and kidney with Pico leaves. I planned to season it with salt and Pico leaves which would take the place of pepper.

“And then, I need to remove the singed fur on the kiba leg.”

I used the cleaver in the stove room to shave away the black burned fur.

After cleaning off most of it, I soaked the entire leg in a pot full of water and used the brush for scrubbing— which was actually hard kiba bristle— to clean it. It was ironic that I was using a brush made from kiba to deal with the kiba fur.

Anyway, after taking care of it carefully, the skin on the hind leg was exposed. The pinkish skin resembled that of a human or a pig. In the past—or should I say, in my previous life—before I came to Forest's Edge, I participated in a farm experience camp. Back then, the hunting hobbyist once told us verbally how to deal with the fur. I tried it out once in the Fa house, and the hide that had been burned couldn't be sold, so Ai Fa gave me the stink eye that day.

The truth was, Ai Fa secretly gave out the hide of the kiba she hunted to the minor houses. This was an open secret, but she still insisted that she threw away all the hides. I felt bad that Ai Fa couldn't complain to me because of her lies, so I only used fire to remove the fur just that one time.

“And so? Why are you burning the fur? The bigger the hide, the more copper plates it can be exchanged for, right?”

“I can only answer [it tastes better this way]. Everyone can only enjoy this luxurious meal during festivals... Can you accept this explanation?”

“I don't know. It's fine, right? This kiba was caught by Ai Fa anyway, so the Fa house can do whatever it wants with it.”

That was right, I only dared to use this method because Ai Fa caught this kiba, but I felt relief that she agreed with me. With the simple and thrifty lifestyle of Forest's Edge, I had to avoid any actions that might get interpreted as splurging.

After receiving Donda Wu's request, I only had one day to think up the dish. I could only re-mesh the dishes I tried out in the Fa house and try to serve a brand new dish. It was a little troubling.

“And so, how will you deal with this leg? The contest of might will end before dusk.”

“I need time to marinate the meat, so that is just enough time... Shela Wu, do you want to learn this cooking method? It's different from the way I usually do it.”

I said that because Shela Wu looked distracted and looked different from usual.

“Ehh? Ah, sorry... I should concentrate on work.”

Shela Wu patted her own cheeks.

“I will focus... My house probably can’t burn the kiba fur away.”

“This dish is just for the feast today. I wanted to make it feel more lavish, so I left the skin. If Ai Fa didn’t hunt this kiba, I was planning to make this dish with normal leg meat. Let’s start the preparation work then.”

I deboned the leg and carved it out into large pieces. I would present one kg of it to the winner of the Battle of Skill and use the other three kg for the other dishes.

I carefully tenderized the meat with a clean stick and then rolled the one kg of meat with rock salt and Pico leaves. It was roughly twice the size of a normal steak.

I then cut some slit on the meat and stuffed myam into the openings in the place of garlic. And with that, the preparation work was complete.

“We will let the meat rest for a while, about the same amount of time we marinate the [Myam-roasted meat].”

Which meant, we would leave the meat there for an hour and another hour was required to cook it. The dish would be done when the sun sets.

“Before that, we need to take care of the stall preparation for tomorrow. Vena Wu and Lala Wu, please help me with mincing the meat for the hamburg steak. Shela Wu, please dice the aria.”

I started cutting the meat to be used in the other dishes.

While Shin Wu and his father were helping me skin the kiba, I cut off some loin and abdomen meat from the torso. The way the meat was cut would affect the taste, and I couldn’t let others do this delicate work.

I used the knife Ai Fa gave me to cut them into slabs and then used the Santoku knife to cut them into thin slices.

I’m working my dad’s knife too hard, it’s about time to buy a specialized meat cutting knife.

That was what I thought, but after browsing the meat cutting knives sold in the Post Station Town, I realized that their sharpness was on par with hunting knives, so I couldn’t push myself to make the purchase. On top of that, I bought a top of the line

vegetable cutting knife from Shumimaru recently, so I was even more reluctant to make a compromise.

High-quality knives were probably sold in the castle town, but I needed to see the blade personally before making the purchase. It would be great if Shumimaru also sold meat-cutting knives.

When I was thinking about this, the plaza became rowdy again. It seemed that rest time was over, and the Battle of Skill was restarting.

Fifteen minutes later, Rimee Wu charged into the stove room with ragged breath and her face red.

“Amazing! Ai Fa won again! Ai Fa just needs to win two more matches to be the number one brave!”

“Ehh~? Who did she win?”

Lala Wu asked in my place.

“Her opponent was Rau Lei! Rau Lei was good, but Ai Fa threw him out easily! Easily!”

Her opponent was Rau Lei, huh.

Since she was victorious against Darum Wu, she could definitely defeat Rau Lei. This meant that Ai Fa had made it into the final four. I didn’t know whether I should be happy for her performance and felt conflicted

“What about the others? Ludo?”

“Ludo lost! He tried to trip Mida, but fell down himself!”

“Hmmp~, in the end, he still can’t get a match against Papa. He must be frustrated. In that case, the ones left are...”

“Papa Donda, Kaslan Lutim, Jiza-nii, and Dan Lutim! Jiza-nii is up next, I’m going to watch!”

Donda Wu against Kaslan Lutim and Jiza Wu against Dan Lutim... Coincidentally, this was the head against heir cross match from the Wu clan and Lutim house. What an

incredible lineup, which made feel like watching, and, at the same time, I didn't feel like watching it too.

"Jiza-nii and Kaslan Lutim are both amazing, but they can't defeat Papa Donda and Dan Lutim. These two were the finalists for the past ten years."

I was surprised to hear Lala Wu say that.

"T-Ten years? What an incredible record... There are three harvest festival every year, correct?"

"Yes, one large scale and two smaller scale festivals every year. By the way, today's festival is small scale. All the kins will attend the large-scale festival."

Three times a year, that meant thirty times in a decade. Either Donda Wu or Dan Lutim had won the tournament every single time. Their prowess was outstanding amongst the denizens of Forest's Edge; I had always vaguely felt that point.

And then— Ai Fa would be matched up with one of them. Although the Battle of Skill would ensure the safety of all participants, my stomach still hurt from thinking about that.

It's impossible for Ai Fa to win the tournament.

That thought also gave me stomach cramps. If Ai Fa had to battle with Donda Wu in the finals, I would be terrified.

Time flew by, and the preparation work was ending soon. From my body clock, I estimated there was still one more hour before sunset. I had to prepare the dish for the winner.

"Well then, I'm going to start. First, sear the outside with a strong fire, just like braised kiba."

I placed the completely marinated chunk of meat onto the griddle, and the surface turned brown. Just like the preparation of steaks and hamburg steak, this was done to seal in the juice.

"After that, spread the cut vegetables into the pot with a small fire."

I chopped the arias and Chachi ahead of time.

The arias were quartered into crescent shapes, while the Chachi was split boldly in half. I spread them across the entire pot and then placed the grilled meat on top.

“Next, pour in a quarter bottle of fruit wine and then cover the lid. We will need to weigh it down with rocks.”

“Is that all? This is really similar to that [Braised kiba] dish.”

“That’s right. However, we cooked [Braised kiba] by using water and sauce and only added fruit wine to this dish for the aroma. This dish uses the moisture from fruit wine and vegetables to steam it, instead of boiling it.”

When adding more firewood, I took care not to let the fire get too big.

“When making [Kiba burgers] or steaks, I would switch to steaming midway to cook the dish thoroughly, right? This meat is even thicker, so the steaming would be even longer. You can think about it that way.”

“I see... What dish is this?”

“For now, I dub it [Roast kiba].”

This wasn’t a dish served in my home or restaurant, but the method to roast beef which I used when Dad, Leina, and I went camping.

It would be great if there was an iron lid that covered the pot tightly. Unfortunately, the Post Station Town in Genos didn’t sell such lids. However, I already tried steaming 10 cm thick slabs of meat, and it was proven to work.

The plan this time was to prepare an amazingly thick slab of meat. I thought that presenting a generous dish to the winner of the contest of might was fitting, but I wondered if the champion would think so.

“The important thing is the fire. Please keep it at a weaker level than the usual weak fire. If the flame is too big, the vegetables touching the bottom of the pot will burn.”

We just needed to continue steaming it for 40 to 50 minutes, and we would be done.

The preparation for tomorrow was finished too, and the girls were free to go now. I was just thinking that when Rimee Wu ran over again.

“Asuta, you are still not done? The next match is Dan Lutim against Ai Fa!”

“Ehh! The semifinal is Ai Fa against Dan Lutim?”

“Yes! Both Jiza-nii and Kaslan Lutim lost! After Ai Fa’s match is Papa Donda versus Mida!”

Ai Fa against Dan Lutim and Mida against Donda Wu, huh.

What a heart-pounding pairing.

“Asuta, go take a look, I will watch the fire.”

Shela Wu said with a calm smile.

“Vena Wu, Lala Wu, you are worried about Donda Wu’s match too, right? Just leave this place to me.”

“Ehh~, can I?”

Lala Wu looked at me squirmingly.

I was troubled, but I still restrained my desires.

“I will be there when the job is done. Lala Wu, go watch the match. You too, Shela Wu.”

“No, my family isn’t competing... Asuta, is this really fine?”

“Yes. Dan Lutim definitely won’t hurt Ai Fa. I will also do my job properly.”

“Alright then, we are off! I will let you know the result of the match!”

The sisters from the Wu clan main house left, leaving just Shela Wu and me to work in the stove room.

That might be so, but we didn’t need to do anything other than adding firewood every few minutes. I stared at the wavering orange flame as I kept praying for Ai Fa’s safety

in my heart.

“...Ai Fa is really exceptional as a hunter. Recently, Darum Wu and Rau Lei can fight on par with Jiza Wu and Kaslan Lutim in a match, you know?”

Shela Wu and I squatted before the stove, and she finally said quietly.

“I see. Ai Fa is hunting kiba at an alarming rate too... By the way, I hope Darum Wu will get well soon.”

When Shela Wu heard what I said, she just sighed depressedly.

Feeling uneasy, I continued:

“Oh right, Darum Wu got badly injured when he protected Shin Wu last month. I interact with him the least of all the Wu clan main house members, what kind of person is he?”

“Darum Wu... is very rash. According to my father Ryada, of all the main house siblings, Darum Wu resembles Donda Wu the most.”

“That’s true, his eyes look just like Donda Wu.”

“Yes... I think Donda Wu and Darum Wu are both outstanding hunters that befit the status of the tribal chief house.”

I couldn’t get along with both of them though.

However, I have known since a long time ago that Donda Wu wasn’t a simple brute. I might not get along well with him, but I didn’t hate him either. As for Darum Wu—because of the commotion with him over Ai Fa, there was a deep gulf between us. When I heard him mocking Ai Fa intentionally, I thought of him as lowly as Diga Tsun; both of them made me mad.

“...Does Ai Fa plan to be a hunter until she withers away in the forest?”

Shela Wu finally spoke quietly again.

“She is a woman, but instead of raising children, she lives as a hunter... No, I’m not refuting her lifestyle, but I don’t understand why she thinks in such a way.”

“I don’t know either, but I think this suits her really well.”

“I just hate the life of waiting for the men to come back everyday...” : Ai Fa told me that in the past. Instead of being protected, she would rather be the one protecting others.

I didn’t really understand the truth behind her words, but my wish to respect her feelings remained the same. However, I didn’t want to be a carefree character that gets protected. Aside from strength, I wanted to watch over Ai Fa in other areas.

“...Ai Fa has no intention of marrying anyone?”

“Yes, that’s probably so...”

I was surprised at mid-sentence. Shela Wu was hugging her knees, squatting on the floor, and staring at the flames; her face looked really red.

“S-Shela Wu, what’s wrong?”

“Ehh? Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s just that... you look different from usual.”

“Is that so? Maybe...”

Shela Wu covered the lower half of her blushing face with her arms that were hugging her knees. Her helpless gaze shifted towards me.

“Just the thought that you might know how I really feel made me embarrassed. Sorry.”

“Y-Your feelings? You mean... for Darum Wu?”

“P-Please don’t say it!”

This was the first time I saw her being so panicky. For the first time, the mature and quiet Shela Wu showed her girly side.

Even though Shela Wu looks so mature, she is just one year older than me.

I felt a little distraught. Was this unfamiliar feeling the so-called protective instinct?

“...Asuta.”

“Yes.”

“...Please don't tell anyone else, okay?”

“Okay! I will keep it a secret!”

“Also, don't worry or sympathize with me. I'm just a woman who can't even move a water flask, and I don't have the rights to pick a husband.”

“That's not true!”

I thought over it for a moment and decided to stand up.

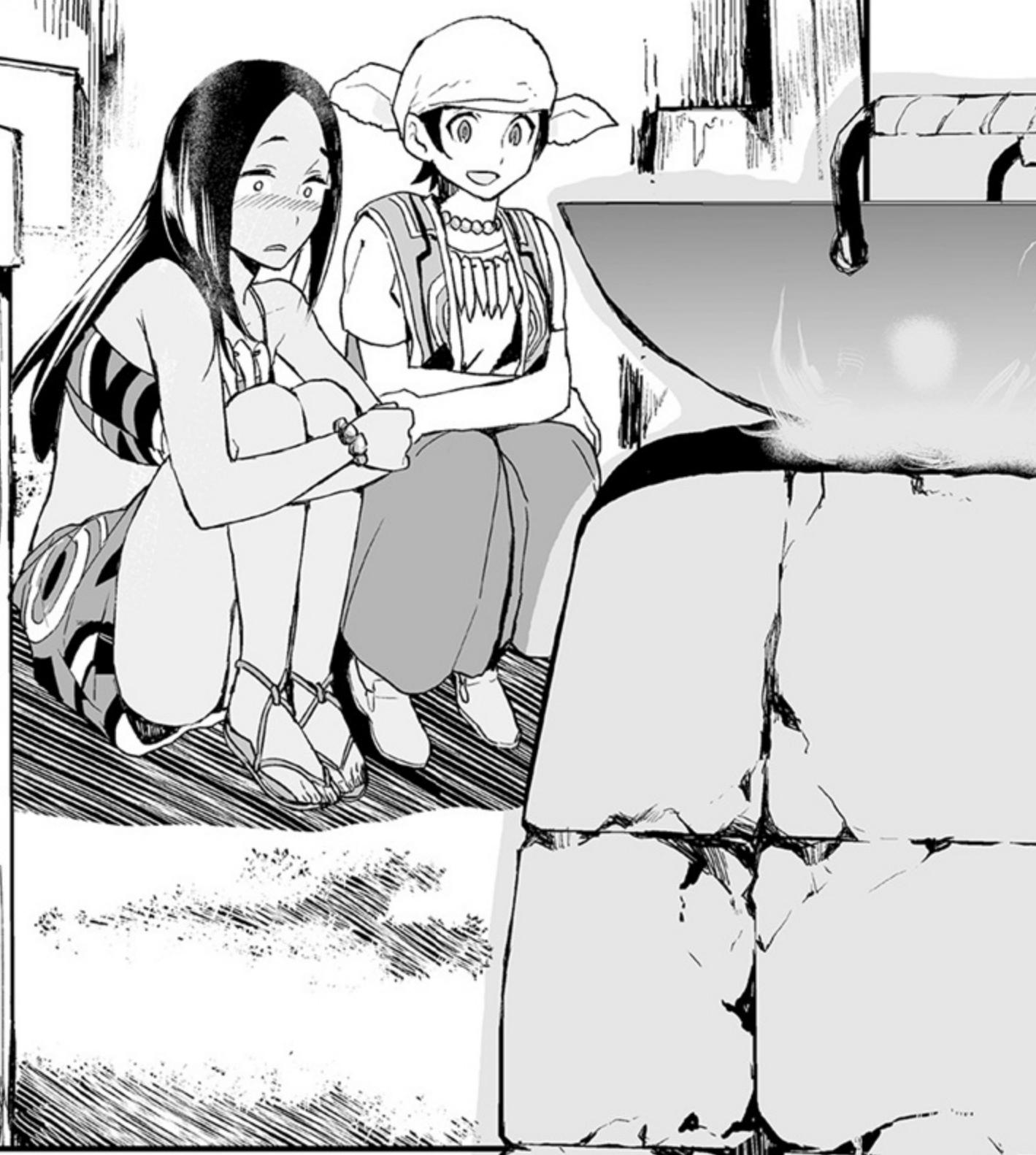
“Shela Wu, can you help me cook this piece of meat that has its skin attached?”

“Ehh?”

“I plan to grill this into a simple meat steak and give it out to everyone. I want you to help me cook this meat and make the sauce by yourself.”

“W-What should I do...?”

“You have to decide by yourself.”



Shela Wu lowered her head with her face still red.

She then tilted her head puzzledly.

“Speaking of which, Lala Wu and the others aren’t back yet. She said that she will tell you the results after Ai Fa and Dan Lutim are done competing.”

“Ah, that’s true.”

It has been 15 minutes.

The uneasiness I had suppressed was starting to swell again.

“Ehh~, does one match take so long?”

“No. I’m baffled by it too.”

Cheers continued coming from the arena.

“Well then, they probably can’t leave the plaza because Donda Wu and Mida’s match is right after that match, right?”

“No, after finalizing the elite eight, there will be a break after every match... Asuta, you should go check out the situation.”

“But...”

“You have always been looking out for me, so I’m just paying you back. Please go over... I also want some time to mull over my feelings.”

She probably said all that after noticing how I felt. But even if she didn’t, I could no longer suppress the uneasiness in my heart.

“Excuse me, I will go take a look.”

With that, I charged out of the stove room.

Ai Fa’s opponent was Dan Lutim. He called the Fa house his friend, so things wouldn’t go badly... That’s what I thought, but I couldn’t keep my heart from wavering.

Did one of them suffer a serious injury?

Or did a malicious third party disrupt the contest?

I entered the plaza worriedly, and the hearty laughter of Dan Lutim wiped all my unfounded fears away.

“Ai Fa! You are really a superb hunter! Aside from Donda Wu, this is the first time I have met such a challenging opponent!”

Dan Lutim stood in the center of the arena with his feet wide apart. His Ebisu-like face, shiny bald head, and round tummy were drenched with sweat.

Facing off against him a few meters away was the equally sweaty Ai Fa. She had a casual expression on her face in her match against Jii Mamu, but she was sweating profusely now, with her shoulders heaving widely.

It seemed that they had been going at it for the entire 15 minutes.

“But it is about time to end this! I’m getting hungry!”

After saying that, Dan Lutim spread out his arms and attempted to grab Ai Fa.

I was shocked by his nimble movements. His massive body weighed over 100 kg, but his explosiveness was on par with Ai Fa and Darum Wu.

Ai Fa barely dodged him, but Dan Lutim didn’t stop.

One of his arms shot out at Ai Fa so fast that the air howled.

Ai Fa kicked off the side of Dan Lutim’s stomach and lept further back.

Dan Lutim changed direction with the same blazing speed in pursuit.

Ai Fa bent down and counter-attacked with the sweep she used to defeat Jii Mamu. But Dan Lutim evaded it easily with a jump.

Ai Fa immediately pushed off with her palms, dodging like a jumping lynx. Dan Lutim’s fingers closed around the space where Ai Fa’s head was a moment ago.

The cheers were thunderous. It was the loudest cheer of the day. Did such an amazing match continue for fifteen minutes? I was at a loss for words.

Dan Lutim was an extraordinary individual. How could he move as fast as Ai Fa despite that large tummy of his? His body weight was twice that of Ai Fa; this was too illogical.

Not just that, Dan Lutim also laughed loudly from time to time. He looked incredibly gleeful.

On the other hand, Ai Fa was going all out. Like a lynx being attacked by a brown bear or lowland gorilla.

“Ai...”

I shouted unconsciously.

“Ai Fa! Don’t give up! Get him!”

Did she hear me...? Ai Fa braced herself and charged into her opponent.

Dan Lutim didn’t dodge like Darum Wu. Standing his ground firmly, he swung his arms at the approaching Ai Fa.

Ai Fa twisted her body and went around to Dan Lutim’s right.

Dan Lutim finally caught her arm.

At the same time, Ai Fa bent down in an attempt to sweep Dan Lutim’s leg.

After grabbing Ai Fa firmly, Dan Lutim could have gone for a bold throw. However, he let go of Ai Fa’s arm without hesitation and avoided the attack by lifting one leg.

Ai Fa’s attack whiffed, so she was about to fall onto the ground. At this moment, Dan Lutim tried to grab her back.

“Ai Fa!”

Ai Fa used one light as a pivot and swiftly turned towards Dan Lutim.

Dan Lutim grabbed her shoulders with his big hands.

It was over.

Ai Fa was falling backward, as if she couldn't withstand Dan Lutim's charge.

However... while she was falling, Ai Fa's right arm grabbed the front of Dan Lutim's shirt, and her left leg kicked at her opponent's right ankle.

Dan Lutim lost his balance for the first time.

If this continued, Ai Fa would fall too and get crushed by his giant body. Hence, she pressed her knee into his large tummy and shifted her center of gravity downwards.

She grabbed his chest, kicked his feet and lowered her body. All these actions worked in tandem together... and Dan Lutim's massive body leaned forward and into the air.

This was probably the circular throw in judo.

But while Ai Fa was doing that, she looked as if she wanted to support herself with her left arm on the ground.

No, I probably saw it wrong. In the end, Ai Fa's left hand didn't touch the ground, and she threw Dan Lutim out with her left knee on his belly.

Dan Lutim's huge body drew an arc in the air before falling with a thud.

The ecstatic crowd erupted in cheers.

However, Raa Lutim's stern voice cut through the cheers.

"Victor, Dan Lutim of the Lutim house! Ai Fa of the Fa house is disqualified!"

The cheers turned into grumble and boos.

The white-haired and muscular elder of the Lutim house stared at the crowd with eagle-like eyes.

"Before Dan Lutim's torso touched the ground, Ai Fa's waist was already grounded. Hence, Dan Lutim is the winner!"

That was why Ai Fa tried to support herself with her left arm midway through the

match.

Ai Fa laid sprawled on the ground and panted. Dan Lutim who was thrown two meters away was also out of breath as he laid on the ground.

Kaslan Lutim charged out from the crowd to check on his father. I also entered the plaza. With the grumbles coming from behind me, I rushed to Ai Fa's side.

"Ai Fa, are you alright!?"

"I... I'm fine..."

She opened her mouth wide with her eyes tightly shut and answered hoarsely. This was the first time I have seen Ai Fa so exhausted.

"Shoulder... Lend me your shoulder... I can't walk by myself..."

"I understand."

I picked up Ai Fa's right arm, supported her back and propped her up. Ai Fa's body was burning hot, and she leaned weakly onto me.

"My sweat... might dirty you..."

"It's fine, don't worry about that."

At this moment, Dan Lutim who was helped up by the powerful arms of his son showed a weak smile:

"I thought that I lost! Ai Fa, why didn't you support yourself with your left arm? If you did, you would have won!"

"...My left arm just healed; I wasn't sure if it could support your huge body. If my arm dislocates again, I won't be able to hunt."

"I see, so that's the reason! I understand."

Dan Lutim pulled Kaslan Lutim to walk towards us and suddenly leaned his sweaty smiling face towards Ai Fa:

“You are really an exemplary hunter! Not only are you powerful, you also know what is important! Ai Fa, I’m glad to be friends with an outstanding hunter like you!”

“You flatter me... I will make a move first.”

After saying that, Ai Fa kicked my leg.

She was hinting that “it is time to go”. I nodded at the gleeful Dan Lutim and Kaslan Lutim who was smiling awkwardly and left the plaza with my battle-worn house head.

The crowd gave their generous applause and cheers for Ai Fa. I couldn’t help smiling awkwardly at how great my house head was.

“...What’s the matter, Asuta? Are you laughing at me for losing so terribly?”

“Ehh?”

I looked at Ai Fa in surprise and found her pouting and leaning against my shoulder.

“How was that terrible? There aren’t many hunters amongst the kins of the Wu clan who could fight with him to such an extent, right?”

“...A loss is a loss.”

“Ehh~, didn’t Lala Wu tell you earlier? Winning is an honor, but there is no shame in losing. Besides, you performed admirably, so you don’t need to feel frustrated over this match.”

“No way. I almost won, so, of course, I will feel frustrated.”

My house head was still pouting cutely, as she pressed her blonde head against my cheeks firmly in retaliation against me.

Part 4

“Sorry for the wait, this is the dish I prepared for today.”

When the sun set beyond the western woods, torches were lit around the plaza, and I presented the dinner of blessing to the champion of the Battle of Skill tournament.

As expected, the winner was Donda Wu.

In the end, I didn't see any of Donda Wu's matches. In the semi-finals, when Mida who had the size advantage charged at him, Donda Wu took him on directly and then tossed Mida aside, displaying the difference in power between them. In the match against the exhausted Dan Lutim, Donda Wu didn't stall the battle, twisting the arm of his opponent with exceptional skill and pushing him onto the ground.

The champion sat on a mini wooden platform, and he crossed his legs with one leg propped up as usual. The grand elder Grandma Jiba placed a grass crown of blessing on his messy brown hair.

He showed his usual sour face, with his usual intimidating aura. But he fought elites like Kaslan Lutim, Mida, and Dan Lutim in quick succession earlier, so his face was full of sweat, and his shoulders and chest were rising slightly. His gaze fell on the plate I presented to him.

This was the biggest plate in the Wu clan village, and I placed the dish for today in it. It was full of steaming hot Chachi, aria, and one kg of [Roast kiba] in the middle of the plate.

“...I thought you would present something more spectacular, but it looks really normal.”

“Yes, but I hope it suits your taste.”

I cut the [Roast kiba] into thick slabs instead of thin slices and poured a special sauce over it. This was made with Tau sauce and fruit wine as the base, and diced aria, myam, salt, Pico leaves, and the caramel-colored kiba juice that dripped off during the roasting were other ingredients. It was the most delicious sauce I had ever made.

“Please eat it while it's hot. The special thing about this dish is that it tastes delicious

even if it gets cold. But the denizens of Forest's Edge prefer hot dishes, correct?"

"Hmmp."

Donda Wu grunted before standing up.

The seventy-odd kins stood around the platform and awaited the start of the feast.

"Well then, let the harvest feast begin! Kins of the Wu clan, offer your thanks to the forest and let its grace become our flesh and blood!"

"Whooocaaa!" : the people responded with courageous cheers and then grabbed their skewers and fruit wines.

After seeing that, Donda Wu sat down heavily and reached for the plate. He picked up a piece of [Roast kiba] with his skewer and bit down with his white teeth that looked strong enough to crush stones.

The meat in [Roast kiba] wasn't as tough as normal steaks, but it wasn't too tender either. After all, I avoided using loin meat and chose the tougher thigh meat.

Unlike roast beef, the insides of [Roast kiba] had to be cooked thoroughly. But I didn't roast it until it was dry, keeping the pinkish meat juicy and concentrating the fresh taste inside the meat. The tender lean meat that had been adequately stripped of its fats, and the skin had been roasted again until it turned a caramel shade, giving it more variety of taste and texture.

In order to draw out the basic taste of the ingredient, I didn't pour too much of the sauce I took pride in on it. Just the salt and Pico leaves I carefully smeared over the meat, and the myam I embedded inside was enough to season the roast meat. The taste would be more prominent after it has cooled down, but it was equally good fresh out of the oven too.

I had been in Forest's Edge for about 60 days, and this dish combined all the techniques I had learned after coming to Forest's Edge. How did it taste? I wasn't expecting for Donda Wu to compliment the food when...

"...Delicious."

"Ehh?"

I lifted my head in surprise.

Donda Wu had his usual sour face as he took another bite of the [Roast kiba] without even looking at me.

He shifted his gaze suspiciously to his feet. There was a bowl of kiba meat soup prepared by the women of the Wu clan, filled with vegetables, and a plate of grilled poitan and offal.

“Hey, what’s that? There’s some unfamiliarly shaped meat in there. Did you use the meat of some other animal?”

“Ah, those are the offal of a kiba. I learned to cook it yesterday, it has an interesting taste.”

There were grilled kiba heart, liver, kidney, and other offal cut into large pieces.

“Ai Fa likes the kiba heart. It doesn’t have any unique flavor, and the texture is the same as meat.”

“...Heart of the kiba, huh.”

Donda Wu picked up a piece of kiba heart with the skewer and put it in his mouth. He closed his blue burning eyes and chewed slowly.

Donda Wu swallowed the heart and then took off one of the necklaces from his neck and handed it to me.

“Thanks for your hard work, here’s the payment.”

“Ehh? Payment?”

Now that he mentioned it, we didn’t discuss the payment term at all.

Be it the house head conference or the uproar that happened after that, the Wu clan had taken great care of us. So I prepared these dishes without expecting any remuneration.

“Thank you. But isn’t the payment too much?”

There were around 20 tusks and horns on the necklace, about 5 kiba's worth or 60 red copper plates.

“...Are your skills that cheap?”

Donda Wu tossed the necklace to my chest and focused on eating his [Roast kiba].

He then glared at me unhappily:

“How long are you going to watch me eat? Your work is done, go eat your food.”

“Y-Yes. I’m going off now.”

With an indescribable feeling of hype and happiness in my heart, I left the platform.

The next instant, a figure charged out like a hound and grabbed my chest.

“Hey, Asuta! What’s going on here!?”

“T-That scared me. Why do you look so upset?”

He had blonde hair, which made me mistake him for Ai Fa, but he was actually the young head of the Lei house, Rau Lei. His aqua-colored eyes were burning as he stared at me from close up.

“How dare you even ask! I ate your cooking!”

“Oh, is that so? So why do you look so furious? Was it not to your liking?”

“How can that be!? I was surprised by how delicious it was! Did you pull your punches for the house head conference!?”

I was confused.

However, I had seen a lot of people lose it because of delicious food, so I wasn’t too shaken by his reaction.

“I’m curious too. Asuta, did you hide your skills during the house head conference? Or did you improve that much in this half a month?”

The sky was getting dark, and the only sources of light were the torches. A large figure walked over from the other end of the plaza. He had a squarish face, mature demeanor, and well-toned body... He was one of the three tribal chiefs I had not met for a long time, Dali Sauti.

"Ah, Dali Sauti, you have recovered from your wounds."

"Yes."

He nodded magnanimously.

Ai Fa met him recently because of the Totos issue, but the last time I saw him was right before Zattsu Tsun and gang caused an uproar. Like what Ai Fa said, he had recovered from his injuries.

By the way, he was speaking with Kamyua Yost in the Post Station Town when I last met him, and he was rather excited. He had reverted to his calm personality tonight and was smiling cheerfully.

"Sorry for the trouble I caused the other time. It's great that you look lively... Well then, can you answer the query from the head of the Lei house and me? We have no rights to be mad even if you conceal your true abilities, but I will feel uneasy if you don't tell me the reason why you did so."

"Do you think I hid my skills...?"

A few days ago, the people from the Wu clan main house praised my improving culinary skills, but, seeing how worked up Rau Lei was, I thought he wanted to tell me something different from that.

"What are you arguing about? Asuta only made this little, it will be all eaten up if you don't pay attention."

Ludo Wu was holding a large plate as he walked over while eating a thigh steak. That was the thick cut steak I made with the 3 kg of meat. It was complemented with steamed aria, Chachi, and other vegetables. There was only about a quarter of it left.

"Save me my share! I haven't eaten my full yet...! Asuta, what's going on here? You agreed to tend to the hearth for the house head conference for the sake of letting the house heads taste your cooking, correct? So why did you keep your power level a

secret?"

"I'm sorry to hear you say that, but I always give my all in my cooking."

"Then, did your skills improved by leaps and bounds in half a month? I also tried your dish during Kaslan Lutim's wedding! That was twenty days before the house head conference, but the improvement wasn't so prominent!"

Rau Lei wasn't angry, just confused. But I was even more lost than him.

Ludo Wu easily sorted out our confusion and questions.

"So, is Asuta's cooking so delicious that you are shocked? Rau Lei, this is no surprise at all."

"But why? Ludo Wu, do you know the reason why his delicious turned delicious?"

"Of course. The food at the house head conference wasn't prepared by Asuta. Although Shin Wu and I only ate jerky that night and didn't taste the food at the house head conference."

I didn't get it immediately.

After a while, I realized what Ludo Wu was saying.

"Ah... so that's how it is."

"That's right. You said that the goal on that day is to teach the Tsun clan woman how to cook, so you and the others would refrain from doing the cooking. Even if they followed your instructions, their cookings wouldn't be as delicious."

But even so, for the people who ate kiba meat that hadn't been bloodlet everyday, the taste made a great impact. So did the grilled poitan.

The dish I chose for that day was [Myam-roasted meat], and even a poorly skilled person could prepare it. That might be so, but how well cooked the meat was, and the way it was grilled with the sauce would affect the tenderness of the meat and the taste of the dish. The standards of me and the other women instructing the Tsun clan was low to just make sure the meat wasn't undercooked or burnt.

No matter what, I felt honored that brutish men like Rau Lei and Dali Sauti were so surprised by the difference.

“I ate the food at Asuta’s stall in the Post Station Town before. It didn’t taste this delicious.”

Rau Lei pressed me for answers, and I explained:

“Back then, I didn’t prepare additional meat patties, so what you ate were [Myam-roasted meat], seasoned to the taste of the people in town. Denizens of Forest’s Edge might find the taste to be too strong.”

“That’s right. During the Lutim house’s wedding, the food was prepared by the women of the Wu clan. Rau Lei, this is the first time you are tasting food cooked by Asuta for the denizens of Forest’s Edge.”

Ludo Wu explained as he tossed a Chachi into his mouth.

“Ah, it tastes great! The meat is tasty, but this Chachi is delicious! I like Chachi.”

Ludo Wu relaxed and showed a smile as adorable as a girl.

The matter had been resolved. As I was sighing in relief, someone grabbed Rau Lei’s arm from the side.

“Hey, head of the Lei house, why are you doing something so rude to Asuta? If you don’t have a good reason, I will be happy to take you on.”

It was Ai Fa.

Rau Lei looked troubled and finally let go of my T-shirt.

“We are not arguing, don’t be so mad... Ai Fa, you want to have another match with me?”

“No matter how many times we fight, the result will be the same.”

Ai Fa said with cold fury and flicked away Rau Lei’s hand.

Rau Lei scratched his nose childishly.

“Ai Fa, Asuta, you two are too sly! Your house has only two people, but one is the best hearth caretaker, the other is a hunter that pushed Dan Lutim to the limit. I don’t get this!”

“Who cares what you think.”

Ai Fa crossed her arms under her breasts smugly and looked at Rau Lei sideways. At this moment, the quiet Dali Sauti laughed softly.

“When I learned that Donda Wu is holding a harvest feast during such a turbulent time, I thought he was an unexpectedly easy-going man. But at least for me, today has been a meaningful day... Since we have the convenient Totos now, I should have invited Graff Zaza to make a trip here too.”

“Ehh, what’s that about Graff Zaza?”

“The Wu clan is outstanding. Not only is the hunter’s prowess impressive, I feel that all the kins of the Wu clan are filled with energy.”

Dali Sauti surveyed the entire plaza.

Illuminated by the torches and the makeshift stoves, everyone was smiling happily. It was a joyous feast, and I saw the same thing during the Lutim house wedding banquet too.

Everyone and their beloved family and kins were enjoying delicious food, drinking wine and making merry. For someone from another world, this powerful and heated scene made me dizzy... Wasn’t this a familiar scene when a feast was held in Forest’s Edge?

“Other than the Wu clan, the Zaza house and the northern houses are the most powerful group, followed by us, the southern houses. However, we wouldn’t be smiling so blissfully during a small harvest feast. Kiba meat and the vegetables from the Post Station Town are food that allows us to survive, just like air and water. We won’t feel any special joy or bliss from them.”

“I see...”

“Every meal gives us joy for surviving another day. The greater the joy, the stronger the will and power to survive. Asuta, that’s what you said, correct? I heard that from

Donda Wu."

"Donda Wu told you that?"

"Yes. Just from today, I understand how powerful the Wu clan is. At the same time, I realize the capability of the Fa house."

There was a bold smile on Dali Sauti's squarish face.

"We will be meeting the people from the Genos castle in 3 days. The denizens of Forest's Edge need to obtain even greater strength and work together. Asuta, Ai Fa, I hope the two of you can do your best for our tribe in the future too."

"Y-Yes."

"This is only natural for denizens of Forest's Edge."

After Ai Fa and I nodded in agreement, Dali Sauti turned around.

"Well then, let us enjoy the dishes that the women of the Wu clan prepared for us. I will take my leave now, please stay safe."

After Dali Sauti left, another figure appeared. It wasn't just one person, but Lala Wu, Shin Wu, and Mida.

"Finally found it! Ludo, don't take Asuta's cooking away! I searched all over for it!"

Lala Wu led the way and charged towards her brother, and then pinched his left ear with all her might. Even though Ludo Wu got the title of a brave, he still couldn't evade the attack while holding such a big plate.

"That hurts, retard! If I leave Asuta's dish unattended, that big guy there will devour it all!"

"You are as much of a glutton as Mida! Enough, hand it over!"

As the siblings squabbled, Mida stared at me with his pig-like small eyes.

"...Mida won't eat all of it. Mida wants to try Asuta's cooking too..."

He didn't make a scene like he did in the past and muttered to himself a little sullenly with his cheeks trembling.

"I understand. There's just a bit left, so eat it cherishingly, alright?"

"Yes... I will cherish it..."

"Tch... Hey Mida, I won't lose to you in the next contest. So don't lose to anyone else aside from me, okay?"

"...Hmm...?"

The atmosphere was harmonious.



During the Lutim house wedding banquet, I worked behind the scenes the entire day and didn't enjoy it with the others at all. Although I didn't cook too much, just what was on this plate, everyone had blissful smiles as they tasted the cookings made by Mama Mia Lei, Leina Wu, and the others. It was a feast the denizens of Forest's Edge only get to enjoy every few months.

Grandma Jiba was seated on a rug not far from here, surrounded by many kins. The large figure laughing heartily with ribs in both hands was definitely Dan Lutim. The small figure mimicking his posture his feet might be Rimee Wu. Two tall figures were chatting some distance away with fruit wine bottles in hand. They were probably Jiza Wu and Kaslan Lutim.

Everyone was enjoying the feast. Be it man or woman, or the small number of elderly and children— the torches shone on the 70-odd kins of the Wu clan. They ate, they drank, and they celebrated life in Forest's Edge.

Dali Sauti was right. Three days later, the tribal chiefs would have a meeting with the people from the Genos castle. Donda Wu intentionally held a harvest feast during such a turbulent time so they would experience the life they want to protect and the happiness that they had.

“Asuta, did you eat anything?”

Ai Fa glared at me with her eyes half closed.

“I just grabbed a few bites when I was cooking.”

“I knew it! You never learn, do you? You are always...”

Ludo Wu's cheerful voice cut off Ai Fa's words.

“Ah, Darum-nii, you are finally up. Look, this is a dish cooked by Asuta.”

Ai Fa and I exchanged a look and then turned to Ludo Wu. Darum Wu pushed his brother's petite body aside gently with the back of his palm and stood before us.

“Hearth caretaker of the Fa house, I have something to say to you.”

The eyes he inherited from his father had a strong light in them.

Ai Fa wanted to speak, but Darum Wu stopped her and continued:

“I already spoke with the head of the Fa house. Hearth caretaker... no, Asuta of the Fa house, you are next. I just want to speak with you without being disturbed by others.”

“Second son of the Wu clan, are you willing to swear that you won’t hurt him?”

Ai Fa interjected with a sharp voice, and Darum Wu replied quietly:

“I promise. You can take my arm or leg if I break my promise. In the name of the second son of the Wu clan and as a hunter in Forest’s Edge, Darum Wu hereby vows that he will not harm Asuta of the Fa house. All who hear me are my witness.”

“Wait! Darum-nii, what are you saying all of a sudden!”

Lala Wu yelled angrily, Ludo Wu frowned troubledly, Shin Wu remained expressionless, and Mida was the same as usual. As for Rau Lei—he glared at the side of Darum Wu’s face with hound-like eyes.

“Are there any problems between you two? Never mind, I heard your vow just now. Darum Wu, if you go against your promise, I will cut off your arms.”

“Whatever.”

Darum Wu muttered softly.

Ai Fa bit her lips tightly and looked at me. I nodded at her and looked up at the tall Darum Wu.

“I understand. Where should we talk?”

“Anywhere is fine, as long as no one disturbs us.”

I followed the poker-faced Darum Wu out of the plaza. We went into a dark alley between two houses.

It was some distance from the noise of the crowds and the torches. Darum Wu checked the surroundings for anyone hiding in the dark and then turned towards me.

“Asuta of the Fa house, did you hear the promise I made with Ai Fa before our contest

of might?"

"Yes, I did."

"In the end, I lost to Ai Fa. I don't have the rights to stop her anymore... Only you can stop her now."

"Stop Ai Fa?"

Darum Wu's expression was blank, but his blue eyes were burning.

If Rau Lei's eyes were like a hunting hound, then his eyes were like that of a wild wolf.

"I'm not good with words, so I will just say what I think... Asuta, don't you want to stop Ai Fa? Can you live carefree even if she withers away in the forest?"

"Are you saying... that Ai Fa should give up her work as a hunter?"

"Of course, what else could I mean?"

His words were too unexpected.

"W-Wait. Darum Wu, you are also doing the dangerous work of a hunter, correct? But you are refuting the job of a hunter?"

"She is a woman. She doesn't have the responsibility of being a hunter, unlike men. Don't make me state such common sense."

"But Ai Fa takes pride in being a hunter. She just happens to be a woman; she has the soul of a hunter, just like you..."

"That's not important. Asuta, I want to know what you think."

With the sound of a footfall, Darum Wu took one step my way.

There was no use in retreating. If Darum Wu wanted to harm me, I couldn't evade at this distance.

"Can you bear with such a fate? She might wither away in the forest tomorrow, you understand? If that happens, will you still accept the reason [because she is a

hunter]?"

"That's... Not all hunters die young in the forest. Even though Ai Fa is a woman, she is still an amazingly capable hunter..."

"Hypocrite. No matter how good she is, she can't live forever. Didn't she suffer a heavy injury just a few days ago? If she ran into a kiba on her way home back then, she would have died."

The piercing light in his burning eyes leaned in close.

I could feel his rage and regret.

"Besides, she even used the dangerous [Sacrificial hunting method]. She even went that far, just how long can she stay safe? Answer me, Asuta. If Ai Fa withers in the forest tomorrow, will you be fine with that? Is that how insignificant Ai Fa is to you?"

"To me, Ai Fa is more precious than anyone else! But I... don't want to refute her lifestyle."

"Is it fine even if you lose her? I— I don't want to lose her!"

Darum Wu could no longer suppress his voice.

The scar across his right cheek turned red.

"I don't want to lose Ai Fa! I can't bear seeing her face such a fate! So I want Ai Fa to live on as a woman! But I — I know I can't stop her anymore."

"That's..."

"That night during the house head conference, I failed to protect Ai Fa. And today, I lost to her. I don't have the rights to say anymore... I can't protect her, I'm powerless now!"

Darum Wu grabbed me by the chest.

He was stronger than Rau Lei, and his fingers were trembling from regret.

"Aren't you going to stop Ai Fa? You are her only family... She already acknowledges you as a member of the Fa house, don't you want to protect her?"

“Of course I want to protect her! But...”

How should I express my feelings?

I didn't wish Ai Fa to die. That much was obvious.

However, I didn't want to refute Ai Fa's way of life, because...

“...I want to protect Ai Fa's feelings, thoughts, and pride. If Ai Fa wants to live as a hunter, I will protect this wish of hers.”

That wasn't it.

After saying that out loud, I felt that I didn't state the most important point.

I didn't even agree with what I said.

And of course, Darum Wu looked as if he didn't agree and pulled at my chest harder.

“Then, can you bear losing Ai Fa?”

“I might not be able to bear it. I might regret it for the rest of my life. But if I want to prioritize Ai Fa's feelings and live with her, I can only steel myself for this.”

Was I wrong?

When the women of the Wu clan sent off their men into the woods, they did so with a resolve I couldn't imagine. In my eyes, they cared for their family more than anyone else, but they accepted the cruel fate that their family might die at any moment. They could only trust their family, and pray for their safety.

What I lacked was this resolve. And so, just like how they trusted their family... I should trust Ai Fa too. Was I wrong?

“...You are very capable. In this short period of time, you have proven this point. Only you can earn copper plates by working in the Post Station Town. Hence, Ai Fa doesn't need to work as a hunter anymore, correct?”

Darum Wu grit his teeth hard as he squeezed out these words with a low and hoarse voice.

So Darum Wu was so worried about Ai Fa. That was a big shock to me.

That made me waver a little. The person most suited for Ai Fa... the one who could save her from this cruel fate wasn't me, but someone like him...

I...

I looked quietly at Darum Wu's twisted face.

I didn't know how much time went by... Darum Wu finally let go of my chest, and he averted his face exhaustedly.

“...When Ai Fa withers away in the forest, I will take your life. Even if I die in my attempt, I will not let this matter rest.”

Finally, Darum Wu turned and left with these words.

I stood in place, unable to move.

Darum Wu left the dark corner, and I felt a slender figure with a plate rushing over... I was probably mistaken. My senses seemed to be failing me.

I could return to the bright and warm world just by advancing a few meters. The orange flame, the noise of the crowd, the heat and vigor of the feast were everywhere.

But, did I have the right to return to that place? I didn't know.

Am I... just relying on the strong will of Ai Fa?

Ai Fa was an outstanding hunter. She told me often that she wouldn't throw her life easily and the proper way of the hunter was to live a long life and hunt as much kiba as possible. I believed her, and, in the end, I was relying on her.

I didn't think Ai Fa would die.

I assumed that fate wouldn't take Ai Fa away unreasonably.

I didn't understand anything.

And despite not understanding, I...

“Asuta, how long are you going to stay here?”

I turned back in surprise.

I definitely won't mistake this voice. With the plaza dyed in reddish-orange color behind her, Ai Fa stood tall in front of me.

“Ai... Ai Fa, what's the matter?”

“Do you even need to ask? I saw the second son of the Wu clan coming out, but you were still nowhere to be found, so I came to fetch you.”

Ai Fa took large strides towards me with a sulking face.

I backed away unconsciously, but she grabbed my arm.

“Why are you running away? Why do you look so sad? You shouldn't be affected by whatever nonsense that second son told you.”

Ai Fa glanced up and down at me with angry eyes; she probably wanted to check if I suffered any violence.

“...Did you eavesdrop on us earlier?”

“I'm not Kamyua Yost and won't do something so shameless. If you say something so rude again, I will make you pay for it.”

“...That's true. Sorry.”

“What's wrong? The one you are angry with isn't the second son of the Wu clan but me?”

Ai Fa lowered her head a little and pouted like she usually did.

As there wasn't anyone else here, she showed her feelings freely. She looked adorable and made my heart ache at the same time too.

“If you are mad at me, I will apologize. Asuta, don't look so sad.”

“Ehh? You don't need to apologize...”

“Is that so? When I lost to Dan Lutim, didn’t I vent my anger out at you?”

I didn’t care about such trivial things.

Even though Ai Fa always did that.

“Back then, I couldn’t suppress my frustration. After calming down, I realized that despite the many restrictions of that contest, I still fought on par with Dan Lutim... who was on equal footing with Donda Wu, so it was something to be proud of.”

Ai Fa smiled a little bashfully.

“My father Gill taught me well. I’m now more confident that I’m a qualified hunter. I made you worried, but the contest of might is very meaningful to me.”

“...I see.”

“What’s the matter, aren’t you happy for me?”

Ai Fa frowned again and leaned in close to me suddenly.

“You are acting weird. It’s rare to see you show such a pained gaze. Asuta, I already told you to not hide anything from me.”

“...That might be so, but some things are hard to say.”

Ai Fa seemed peeved by my answer.

She then said: “Don’t wanna.”

Instead of “You can’t”, it was “Don’t wanna”.

The subtle change in her tone was her childish side she would show every now and then.

“I earned my pride as a hunter, and your cooking skills got acknowledged by Donda Wu once again. Your eyes can’t be so sad on this joyous day.”

“Even if you say that...”

“Don’t wanna, don’t wanna.”

Ai Fa clutched my fingers tightly with hers.

“Somehow, I feel that you are so far away. No, not simply far away... I feel as if you are going to disappear.”

Ai Fa walked towards me with an anxious face.

“I already told you. Asuta, I won’t permit you to disappear in front of me.”

“...”

“You are my irreplaceable family. If you are gone... I won’t be able to hold on too.”

I could feel Ai Fa’s breath on my face.

Her sweet fragrance tickled my nasal cavity.

I could feel the warmth from her fingertips.

“...If I made you uncomfortable, I apologize.”

Ai Fa said quietly, relaxed her fingers, and then hugged me from the front.

“Stay by my side forever. I will promise to accompany for the rest of my life too.”

Ai Fa’s arms circled around my back and hugged me tightly, and I felt that I was going to be crushed.

Although I couldn’t hug her back equally hard, my arms still went around her back quietly.

“If you permit it, I want to stay by your side too.”

“What are you saying? I’m the one who wants us to be together forever.”

I realized one thing.

I liked how Ai Fa was right now.

Be it her pride as a hunter, her stubbornness, her childlike fragileness, her kindness hidden behind her acting difficult — I liked everything about Ai Fa.

I didn't want to lose her.

If possible, I hoped she wouldn't do anything dangerous.

But what I really wanted... was for Ai Fa to never change.

If Ai Fa could transfer her pride and conviction to a work other than a hunter, I would give her my heartfelt blessing... But since living as a hunter brought Ai Fa the most happiness, I had to support her and protect her instead of refuting her.

That was the only thing that I could promise for now. With that in mind, I finally hugged Ai Fa tightly.

After about 15 seconds, Ai Fa complained: "It hurts."

And so, the 27th of the Blue Month, on the 64th day since I arrived in this world, with the thoughts of many people entangled in my fingers, I spent a quiet night.

Mid-Meal Snack

The Melancholy of the Wu Clan's Eldest Daughter

Vena Wu melancholically watched her kins enjoying themselves at the banquet.

Today was a wedding banquet of the head of the Lilim house taking a woman from the Lei house as his wife, and it was held in the Wu clan plaza. All one hundred-odd kins were here to witness this marriage. Torches were lit all around the plaza, and makeshift stoves were used to grill meat or reheat the soup. The celebration was so heated that it was bordering on madness.

Aside from influential people, a wedding wouldn't normally be held in the Wu clan plaza with all the kins in attendance. The banquet today was special. Because the Lilim house that wasn't related to the Wu clan by blood was now a kin of the Wu clan, it was cause for celebration.

To think a minor house like Lilim can become a kin of the Wu clan...

Vena Wu who was in an elegant banquet attire sighed quietly in the night.

Vena Wu just turned 15 a few days ago. Denizens of Forest's Edge could be wed when they were 15. Young people of marriageable age would seek out their spouses during such banquets. And so, Vena Wu hid in an inconspicuous corner of the plaza and looked at the figures of her kins enjoying the party from afar.

I just turned 15, so why are so many people proposing to me...

Vena Wu thought as she looked at the bride and groom clinging to each other on the ceremonial stage.

The head of the Lilim house was a man in his prime who was close to 40. His bride was a 16 years old girl from the Lei house.

The difference in age wasn't important; the head of the Lilim house was a capable hunter and had to leave his strong bloodline behind. Since he got widowed while he was still young, it was only natural for him to remarry. For powerful hunters, this was

part of their noble obligations.

The Lilim house was a surprisingly small house. Including the house head, they only had four members and two young children. Normally, such a minor house couldn't become a kin of the Wu clan. Vena Wu could understand if they forsook their family name and joined the Wu clan. After all, according to the tradition in Forest's Edge, it was only natural for the weak houses to lose their family name.

Despite that, the Wu clan allowed the Lilim house to join them as a kin house. Amongst the Wu clan's kins, the Lei house was the third largest, right behind the Wu clan and Lutim house. After obtaining permission from the six house heads led by Donda Wu, the Lilim house took in a Lei house woman in marriage. They became related to the Lei house through marriage and were now the seventh kin house of the Wu clan.

It went without saying that there were heated arguments at the start, but the head of the Lilim house showed great sincerity and prowess as a hunter, and his wish got granted.



Vena Wu heard that the girl from the Lei house also showed her will and determination to the head of the Lei house and Donda Wu. This couple met each other along the road, but they yearned for each other so strongly and won this uphill battle. Just what kind of emotions made them do something so reckless? The young Vena Wu couldn't imagine.

They could actually fall so deeply for another person... I'm very envious, but on the other hand, it fills me with fear...

The men who proposed to Vena Wu or expressed their wish to marry into the clan for her were as numerous as the stars. As the eldest daughter of the Wu clan main house, Vena Wu couldn't be wed to someone of dubious standings. She got her hands full dealing with the Wu clan branch houses, the Lei house, the Lutim house and men from other powerful houses. Turning down all these men one at a time annoyed her to no end.

I didn't even talk much with them, why did they think I'm someone they can spend the rest of their lives with...

Vena Wu couldn't understand.

She was convinced that these people were only after her looks or her status as the eldest daughter of the Wu clan.

They don't care what kind of person I am... How can I marry a man like that?

Vena Wu didn't share her thoughts with them.

Vena Wu who was just 15 understood that very few people in Forest's Edge had the same troubles as her.

There wasn't any need for a reason to love somebody. After falling in love, you would want to spend the rest of your life with them, share all your joy and suffering, and the urge to raise children would come naturally. There was no need for reasons or words... Vena Wu grew up where such an idea was prominent.

Vena Wu's parents met few times during banquets and decided to marry. But even so, they still loved each other deeply and had seven children. After twenty years of marriage, their feelings for each other remained unchanged. This was the way that the denizens of Forest's Edge should have.

...How did they manage to do that...

Vena Wu loved her family deeply. To her, her parents, grandmother, great-grandmother, and siblings were all irreplaceable existences. If the heavens were to take any one of them, she would gladly go in their place. She couldn't bear seeing righteous souls of her family return to the forest, while someone with a twisted personality like her gets to live. That was how deeply Vena Wu loved her ten family members.

A thought arose in her. If she couldn't love her spouse with the same feelings, there was no point in getting married.

...Everyone has so sincere thoughts; why am I the only one with such twisted thinking...?

Vena Wu sighed as she thought about that. She had lost count of how many times she had sighed today.

At this moment, some noise came from the trees beside her.

Was it the pup of a Gizu? Vena Wu stood up hurriedly.

However, it wasn't a beast but a man of Forest's Edge wearing a hunter's cape and a saber by his waist.

Vena Wu sighed in relief, but the man seemed troubled. He looked around him and was more flustered than Vena Wu. He knelt down on one knee as if he was pleading for something.

“Pardon me for surprising you. I didn't come here with malicious intent.”

Vena Wu didn't understand what he was saying in the beginning.

However, his words fermented slowly in her mind, and she backed away on reflex.

“You... You are not a kin of the Wu clan...”

“Yes, I'm from the Dai house. My name is Diru Dai, I'm the second son of the main house.”

Vena Wu had never heard of this house before.

No matter what, this man wasn't a kin of the Wu clan.

"Why is someone from the Dai house intruding into the Wu clan village...? As you can see, we are having a wedding today..."

"Yes, I'm sorry. I heard that the scale of the Wu clan banquets is very big, so I couldn't suppress my curiosity and came to take a look."

Diru Dai didn't look particularly ferocious or brave and seemed a little weak amongst the men of Forest's Edge.

He was tall but wasn't bulky, and his expression had a hint of gentleness. Diru Dai had brown hair that reached his shoulders and meek-looking brown eyes. Vena Wu was used to the fierce and strong appearance of men in the Wu clan, so Diru Dai seemed unreliable to her.

"Curiosity, huh... But isn't it against the customs of Forest's Edge to peek at the banquet of a house that isn't your kin...?"

"I can't deny that. I have been feeling melancholic recently and lost control."

Even his words sounded weak. Was he someone from the Post Station Town pretending to be a hunter from Forest's Edge? Vena Wu couldn't help imagining.

"...Why are you melancholic...?"

She only asked on a whim.

After all, this young man seemed incapable of harming Vena Wu. Besides... compared to her kins who looked so happy, she felt closer to the gloomy young man. She was more suited to being with dreary people today. She couldn't refute that she harbored such depressing thoughts.

Diru Dai remained on one knee and blinked.

"Right... No, this isn't something I can tell others..."

"I won't force you if you don't want to tell me... But since you surprised me, shouldn't you tell me about it as compensation...?"

“Alright... I just... fell for someone who has a huge difference in status from me, and it fills me with pain.”

“Is that so...”

Vena Wu was a little disappointed.

“So it’s love troubles, huh... I was hoping for something more interesting...”

“T-That’s rather mean. For me, it’s something that will decide my future.”

“The subject will definitely think that... But to think a man could be troubled over something like this...”

“Of course I will feel troubled. Choosing a spouse is the most important matter in one’s life, correct? It’s the same for both men and women.”

“Really...?”

Vena Wu said disinterestedly and then sat down on the log again.

“It’s my first time seeing a man talking about such things with a woman... You are really weird...”

“You are the one who asked me to tell you.”

Diru Dai said and suddenly raised the corners of his lips.

“You are also weird. Are all women in the Wu clan strong and cold like you?”

“...This has nothing to do with the Wu clan... I’m just me...”

Vena Wu answered a little unhappily, and Diru Dai continued smiling, but his eyes were a little sad.

“I see. But if the denizens of Forest’s Edge didn’t place so much emphasis on one’s heritage, I wouldn’t have to be so troubled. I’m proud to be a denizen of Forest’s Edge... but I hate the customs of Forest’s Edge.”

“You are exaggerating...”

Vena Wu shrugged.

“Just who did you fell for... Is it a kin of the Wu clan...?”

“No, it’s...”

“What are you doing!”

When Diru Dai was about to answer, a stern yell came from the direction of the plaza.

Vena Wu’s older and younger brother, Jiza Wu and Darum Wu came over.

“Who the hell are you? You are not a kin of the Wu clan, correct? Are you from the Tsun clan?”

Darum Wu reached for the blade at his waist as he asked a series of questions. He was just fourteen but was tall and a very capable hunter. After seeing Darum Wu’s burning blue eyes that were just the same as Papa Donda’s, Diru Dai quickly lowered his head.

“No, I’m from the Dai house. I don’t wish to intrude into the Wu clan’s banquet...”

“The Dai house is a minor house situated further to the north, correct?”

Jiza Wu asked calmly this time.

Even though Jiza Wu’s voice and expression were calm and steady, his body was much bulkier than his brother. Jiza Wu who just turned eighteen could already make it into the elite eight in the contest of might.

“No matter what, houses not related to the Wu clan may not participate in the banquet. Hurry up and leave.”

“No, that’s...”

“If you don’t leave, that would be committing the taboo of transgressing the home of another family. I will have to take your toe.”

Diru Dai stood up, his face twisted from sadness, and his head hung low.

“I will leave right now. I apologize for my impudent actions... Farewell.”

“Ah, wait...”

When he heard Vena Wu’s words, the youth glanced at her sadly and disappeared into the night.

“What a suspicious man, I should inform the clan head Donda.”

After saying that, Jiza Wu looked at Vena Wu with his slit-like eyes.

“You should call for us when you see a suspicious character. Why did you chat with him so leisurely?”

“It’s nothing... I only talked with him because I was bored...”

“Vena, you are the only one who thinks this is boring.”

Jiza Wu tilted his thick neck quizzedly.

“It’s almost time for the women to dance and you should get ready too.”

“Don’t wanna... I don’t want to dance...”

“You are already 15; you should dance for everyone so you can find a good spouse.”

Jiza Wu insisted, but Darum Wu spoke up for her:

“It’s fine even if she doesn’t dance. Even if you leave her alone, there will still be plenty of men proposing to her. She doesn’t need to flaunt her beauty; leave the chance to the other girls.”

“Darum, thank you... you are so gentle...”

“Don’t treat me like a kid, I’m already a hunter.”

Darum Wu showed a vicious face, but Vena Wu just found that adorable. Even though Darum Wu was already taller than Vena Wu and had stopped addressing her as an elder sister, Vena Wu still thought of Darum Wu as a cute little brother.

“Jiza-nii, you should go back to the plaza...? This is your only chance to speak with Sati Lei, right...?”

Jiza Wu stared at Vena Wu's face, shrugged his massive shoulders, and returned to the plaza.

Darum Wu watched him go and then leaned against the tree that Vena Wu was sitting under.

"Darum, aren't you going back...?"

"I'm just 14 and can't choose my spouse yet. There's no point in watching the girls dance."

He said crudely.

He was staying with Vena Wu because he was worried that Diru Dai would come back; that was his personality.

By the way... Just what is with that Diru Dai...

With her precious younger brother accompanying her, Vena Wu lowered her head and pondered.

Vena Wu would find out in the near future.



The next morning, everyone was busy cleaning up after the banquet.

They needed to clean up after the party of over a hundred people, so just dismantling the temporary stone stoves and the ceremonial stage was tedious work. They had to deal with the remnants of the bonfire, clean the pots and plates that were used, and dump the kiba bones into the woods. When they finished all these tasks, the sun was already high in the sky.

"Alright then, let's start doing our usual chores. We will forage for firewood and herbs; please tan the hides and do the house chores."

After their mother Mia Lei Wu gave her instructions, she left for the woods with a few others. Kiba would wake from their slumber at noon, so they had to hurry and forage for firewood, Pico leaves and lilo in the morning. Vena Wu and her sisters were left to house sit and finish the tasks assigned by their mother.

“Vena-nee, the bride from the Lei house yesterday was very pretty.”

They laid out the kiba hide in a sunny place, and Leina Wu started speaking.

Leina Wu was twelve years old and Vena Wu’s first younger sister. Leina Wu possessed black hair, which was rare in the Wu clan, tied up into twin tails and had an innocent smile.

“The next ones to be wedded should be Jiza-nii and Sati Lei, right? Everyone will have to come to the Wu clan and celebrate again.”

“Yes, that’s true...”

“I’m looking forward to it. Vena-nee, when are you getting married?”

Seeing her sister’s expectant eyes, Vena Wu responded with a heavy gaze.

“I’m just 15... I don’t want to have a spouse so soon...”

“Ehh? But everyone wants to marry you! Did you turn them all down?”

“...As the eldest daughter of the Wu clan main house, I can’t choose a partner so thoughtlessly...”

Vena Wu made an offhand excuse, and Leina Wu nodded.

“I see~, but I’m looking forward to your wedding! You are already beautiful, so you will be more mesmerizing than any other women on the day of your wedding.”

“...I hope so...”

It was cruel to ask the twelve-year-old Leina Wu to understand how she felt. Vena Wu suppressed her sigh and then hung the hide of the kiba on the rope tied between two trees.

At this moment, there were shouting sounds from the food store behind them.

The commotion originated from their younger siblings, Ludo Wu and Lala Wu.

“What’s all this racket...? You have to do your work properly...”

“Ludo threw Pico leaves at me! They got into my nose!”

“Hmmp! You are so short yourself, and you still call me a shorty; it’s your fault!”

Ludo Wu was ten, and Lala Wu was eight. They were at an mischievous age, but children five years and older had to complete the tasks entrusted to them.

“Mama Mia Lei will scold you if you waste Pico leaves...”

“Vena-nee is so noisy... Where did Rimee go?”

“She went on a stroll with Grandma Jiba just now... Lala, are you alright...?”

“Yes.”

Lala Wu rubbed her nose with teary eyes. One could easily sympathize with her appearance, but Ludo wouldn’t bully his sister without reason. Lala Wu must have acted first, which led to Ludo’s retaliation.

“Really now. I want to be a hunter soon, I can’t wait three years!”

“If you really think so, work hard and build up your strength... Your body is still so small, you can’t work as a hunter yet...”

“Vena, even you are saying I’m too small! Just because your butt has gotten bigger~.”

Ludo Wu’s smacked Vena Wu’s ass with his small palm.

Vena Wu turned red and cried: “Stop that!”, but Ludo Wu had already scurried off.

“Ludo is being such a bother... I have to get Papa Donda to lecture him...”

“That’s right.”

Although she said that, Leina Wu was all smiles.

“Vena-nee, you will become a great wife after all.”

“Huh...? What do you mean...?”

“It’s probably because you have many younger siblings, so even though you are just 15, you look no different from a mother!”

“...But you are better than me at grilling meat and cooking soup...”

The last night’s wedding probably filled Leina Wu’s mind with weddings and marriage. Vena Wu was the same, but their feelings were worlds apart. That made Vena Wu’s mood even heavier.

“Alright, that’s it with the hide... I will go chop some wood. Leina, can you go sun the Pico leaves with Lala...? If there are any signs of rain, remember to shift the hide and Pico leaves under the shade...”

“Yes, got it!”

And so, Vena Wu managed to get away from her beloved sister. She took out a machete and wood and then headed to the side of the house by herself.

Jiza-nii is 18, Sati Lei is 16... when I get older, everyone will rush me to marry...

Fortunately, her mother who was in charge of all the women— Mia Lei Wu wasn’t rushing her to wed. Mia Lei Wu thought that Vena Wu just had to wait patiently for her fated partner to appear.

One day, even Mama Mia Lei will lose her patience... Can I really meet someone I will want to marry...?

Vena Wu swung her machete while harboring such thoughts.

The wood got split and rolled off the chopping block.

She worked quietly, and when she was halfway done, she felt someone approaching her.

She turned her head back and held her breath in surprise. Diru Dai had appeared before her once again.

“Sorry for disturbing your work, may I have a word with you?”

“You... What are you doing here...?”

“I didn’t intrude in today. I told someone that I was looking for you, and they permitted me to enter the village.”

Diru Dai smiled gently.

Now that she was seeing him in the day, Vena Wu found him to be gentler than the other men from the Forest's Edge and a little unreliable.

“You are looking for me... But you don’t even know my name...?”

“Yes, I just said I was looking for a beautiful lady with light-colored eyes and hair who is around 15, and they assumed I am looking for Vena Wu from the main house... So you are Vena Wu.”

Diru Dai stopped a few steps away and didn’t go any closer to Vena Wu.

It was impossible for him to do anything nefarious in the middle of the Wu clan village. The powerful hunters were resting at home in preparation for their hunt at noon. Moreover, Diru Dai seemed weaker than the youngest hunter in the Wu clan.

“...What business do you have with me...?”

“I want to apologize to you for rudeness yesterday. After I told the women from the branch house that, they brought me over unhesitantly.”

“...I think you should leave before Papa Donda and the rest wake up, you know...?”

“Yes, I don’t plan to stay for long; I still need to perform my duties as a hunter.”

Diru Dai said and stayed where he was.

Vena Wu sighed and waved the machete in her right hand a little.

“You already apologized yesterday... Is there anything else...?”

“No... It’s nothing important...”

Diru Dai narrowed his eyes and smiled sadly.

“...Vena Wu, you are beautiful.”

“...What...?”

“This was on my mind since last night. I have never seen a woman more beautiful than you.”

“...Didn’t you mention last night that you are in love with a woman? And she isn’t from the Wu clan...?”

“Yes. But your beauty mesmerized me... However, it is ironic that you are the eldest daughter of the Wu clan.”

Diru Dai shook his head slowly.

“I came to see you because I wanted to give up on that impossible love. But to think that you have such a high status... It’s really ironic. Seems like I’m fated to fall for women out of my league.”

“That has nothing to do with me...”

Vena Wu pulled back her long fringe and stared at him.

“You were madly in love with another woman, and you are saying this to me even though we just met... Are your feelings so cheap...?”

“That’s not true... I have been tormented by a love that won’t bear fruit, so I wanted to rely on you. But it is probably the will of the forest that I experienced such pain once again.”

“You actually think your own shallowness is the will of the forest; isn’t that too cocky...?”

After saying that, Vena Wu felt a little puzzled.

“Diru Dai... you are really a queer man... You are like a man from the city pretending to be a denizen of Forest’s Edge...”

“That’s right, my family often tells me that. I probably turned out this way because I like going to the Post Station Town.”

“...Do you like the Genos city...?”

What a surprising statement.

Diru Dai smiled gently and nodded.

“That’s right. Even if you ask me, I’m not sure how to answer either. But the people in the city are very free, right? Especially the travelers from Semu and Jaguar, they can just come and go as they please. How do they feel about living such a life? I have always been curious about that.”

“...”

“The denizens of Forest’s Edge spend their entire lives in the edge of the Morga Forest and would only visit the city occasionally to procure aria and poitan. We never met the people outside. I can’t tell anyone else about this... but such a lifestyle seems too constrictive.”

“Yes... I think so too...”

Vena Wu felt her heart start to race.

That was the thought that Vena Wu hid deep in her heart and had never confessed to her family.

“The people in the Forest’s Edge settlement only see me as the eldest daughter of the Wu clan... The people in the Genos Post Station Town only think of me as a barbaric denizen of Forest’s Edge... Will the people far away from Genos treat me like a normal girl...?”

“Yes, you are right.”

Diru Dai narrowed his eyes slightly.

Vena Wu’s heart raced even faster.

“In that case, you... can just leave the Forest’s Edge settlement, right...? Then you won’t need to give up on your feelings...”

“Ehh?”

Diru Dai opened his eyes wide.

Vena Wu leaned closer unconsciously.

“I don’t know who is the object of your love... But if you leave the forest, you won’t have to worry about the scale of the houses... You will have to abandon your hometown, but your love will blossom, and you can live a blissful life...”

Diru Dai’s face turned pale, and he backed off a few steps.

He then held his right fist to his forehead and lowered his head.

“Oh forest, please forgive this confused denizen... Vena Wu, even if it’s just a joke, you can’t talk about leaving the forest.”

“...”

“The forest bestows us with our souls, and our spirit will return to the woods in the future. This law is absolute, and no matter what doubts you may have, you cannot violate this rule.”

“I see...”

Vena Wu felt her heart cooling down quickly.

“I’m saying this for your own good... It seems you would rather give up on your heart’s desire instead of abandoning the forest...”

“Just harboring such thoughts is desecrating the forest. Besides, there is no way she would agree to this.”

“In that case, you should find a partner that suits you...”

Vena Wu had lost interest in this young man.

Diru Dai was probably showing a sour face. She turned her back towards him, picked up a piece of wood, and set it on the chopping block.

“Alright then, I still have matters to attend to, could you leave...? You have to hunt too, right...?”

“I see... Then, may I ask one last thing?”

Diru Dai went around to Vena Wu's side with a smile again.

"I heard that the Lilim house became one of the Wu clan's kin houses. Even though the Dai house isn't big, we have more members than the Lilim house and are more powerful. In that case, could the Dai house be part of the Wu clan's kin..."

"The head of the Lilim house defeated the head of the Lei house in a contest of might, you know...? Even though he couldn't defeat Papa Donda and the head of the Lutim house, they still acknowledge his prowess as a hunter... Can you do that...?"

Vena Wu looked at Diru Dai with a sideways glance.

"You can be delusional if you want... But I have no intention of marrying a weak man like you, please don't forget that..."

Diru Dai smiled sadly.

Was a person who could smile in such a situation strong or weak? Vena Wu neither knew nor wanted to know.

"...Sorry for disturbing your work. I will be going now."

Vena Wu didn't answer and continued chopping wood with her machete.

With Diru Dai gone, Vena Wu was left alone.

He is just a normal Forest's Edge denizen...

Diru Dai's reaction wasn't strange at all.

So Vena Wu was the only one with such thoughts after all.

Was living her entire life in the Forest's Edge settlement the right thing to do? No other denizen of Forest's Edge worried about that.

I did something stupid...

She told what she was concealing from her family to someone she met last night. Doing that so thoughtlessly made her emotions even heavier.

Vena Wu didn't want to abandon her hometown. Just the thought of leaving her beloved family broke her heart.

However, she couldn't forsake this dream of hers either.

If she really left Forest's Edge, would she be able to live without any regrets? Would she stop troubling over how out of place she was and live on freely?

...It's impossible for me to leave this place...

Vena Wu swung her machete down with all her might.

The wood seemed to be rotten in the middle and broke into pieces.



A few days later, when Vena Wu had finally banished the existence of Diru Dai from her mind, those people appeared.

It was noon, and the men had entered the woods while the women were taking a short break before embarking on their next chores. Vena Wu was strolling by herself in the village when those people blocked her path arrogantly.

“Ohh... Are you the eldest daughter of the Wu clan?”

One of them was a girl with an ominous aura about her.

The girl was about Vena Wu's age. Her dark brown hair that had been braided into dreads hung over her shoulders. There was an icy light in her dark eyes, and, despite her beautiful appearance, she felt as dangerous as a snake.

The other person was a gray-haired old man. He had a well-toned body that befit a hunter, but his eyes were as murky as a dead man. In another sense, the air around him was as dangerous as that girl.

“Who are you...? I have never seen you around here before...?”

“I'm the eldest daughter of the Tsun clan, Yamiel Tsun. This is Tay Tsun from the branch house.”

When Vena Wu heard her answer, she stood stiffly on the spot.

The Tsun clan was the tribal chief clan of the Forest's Edge. They had been on bad terms with the Wu clan since times of old. People had been saying for a long time now that the Tsun and the Wu clan would clash in a battle to extinction sooner or later.

"Why are the people from the Tsun clan loitering here...? Your village is in the northern end of the settlement, correct...?"

"Yes, I'm troubled by this too."

The woman who called herself Yamiel Tsun raised the corners of her lips slightly.

"However, it's fortunate that I met you. This might be the guidance of the forest."

"...What business do you have with me...?"

Vena Wu pretended to be calm, but she was very shaken inside.

All the Wu clan men were in the forest; even if she ran home, there were only women in her village. The man before her might look lifeless, but a woman couldn't match him.

Forest's Edge did not permit anyone to harm others without any reason. However, when Vena Wu was born, people from the Tsun clan abducted a woman from the Mufa house who was going to marry into the Wu clan and murdered her. There wasn't any clear-cut evidence, but since that incident, the two clans became sworn enemies. If the two of them killed Vena Wu, the Wu clan would demand the Tsun clan to pay back in blood.

"It's not a big matter. Do you know Diru Dai?"

"...Diru Dai...?"

"Yes, Diru Dai. He is a troubling man. He hails from a minor house, but wishes to woo me."

Did this venomous snake-like women win Diru Dai over? Vena Wu was shocked.

"That man accompanied his house head to the house head conference and fell for me

at the first sight when he visited the Tsun clan village. To fall for the eldest daughter of the Tsun clan main house, what is he thinking?"

"...What's so strange about that...? Just let him marry into the Tsun clan, and the matters would be solved..."

"How can a minor house Dai become a kin of the Tsun clan? Their members are few, and they are located far away; it's impossible for us to acknowledge them... Besides, the Dai house is close to the Wu clan village, who knows when they would betray us."

Yamiel Tsun smiled viciously at this point.

"I won't accept his marriage proposal. Even if everyone agrees, the former clan head of the Tsun clan won't give his approval."

"...The former head of the Tsun clan...?"

"Anyway, because of the troubles Diru Dai caused me, I advised him to not come near the Tsun clan ever again... But then, I heard him mention your name."

That man actually mentioned Vena Wu's name to this woman.

Vena Wu felt annoyed from the bottom of her heart.

"I'm glad that man fell for another girl... but will you marry him? It's unlikely for the eldest daughter of the Wu clan main house to marry into a minor house like the Dai house, right?"

"I won't marry over or take him into the clan... I have no plans of making that man my spouse..."

"Really?"

Yamiel Tsun narrowed her eyes.

Her eyes were like those of a venomous snake who had her sight on her prey.

"You don't have to be concerned about me. I came all this way to break off all ties with that man."

“I’m not being concerned about you...”

Did this matter make Yamiel Tsun feel ill will towards Vena Wu?

Yamiel Tsun was troubled by a man who kept wooing her, and when she made the effort to warn him against making any more advances, she realized that man had already fallen for another girl. It was hard for Vena Wu to imagine, but if Yamiel Tsun was a prideful person, she might be infuriated by this.

“...I see. If that is the truth, you made a wise choice. If you marry that man who is all talk, you will end up in misfortune.”

“...”

“You don’t need to worry about that man anymore. Diru Dai will be wed to a woman from the Dai branch house.”

“Huh...? How sudden...”

“That’s right. It was decided just now.”

Yamiel Tsun giggled.

“I ordered him to do so. He has a frivolous nature and might appear before us again one day. Do stop him from doing so; I requested for him to get married to a woman from their branch house.”

While Vena Wu was still stunned, Yamiel Tsun walked towards her.

Yamiel Tsun’s glossy red lips breathed out warmly and said venomously:

“Think about it; that man proposed to both the Tsun clan and the Wu clan at the same time. No matter what his intentions were, if we permit his frivolous actions, the Tsun and Wu clan might shed blood in a Clash of Clans. I’m doing this to stop this possibility at the roots.”

“...You are forcing him to marry for something like this...?”

“Ahh, a war between the Tsun and the Wu clans is a serious matter though? If that really happens, the Forest’s Edge settlement would be destroyed.”

They were so close that their cheeks were almost touching. Yamiel Tsun showed a venomous snake-like smile.

"I had to do this for the sake of saving Forest's Edge. It would be retarded for that man to cause the destruction of Forest's Edge."

"...You are a really scary woman..."

Yamiel Tsun was still smiling viciously as she moved away from Vena Wu.

"Anyway, this matter is resolved. If you still yearn for that man, it's regrettable, but I suggest you find a better partner."

And so, Yamiel Tsun and the strange follower named Tay Tsun turned and left.

Vena Wu returned to the Wu clan village and sighed heavily.

Could it be... that girl named Yamiel Tsun wants to escape from the Forest's Edge settlement too...?

Both she and Vena Wu held expectations for Diru Dai but were betrayed... Vena Wu couldn't help thinking that way. If not for that, Vena Wu didn't think she would treat Diru Dai so cruelly.

Never mind, compared to Yamiel Tsun and me, he will have a happier life with another woman...

Vena Wu had no intentions of belittling herself, but she couldn't help feeling that way.

At the very least, she did harbor thoughts that went against the rules of Forest's Edge. She didn't have the courage to realize this thought, but just having this thinking was enough to make her an infidel and betrayer.

It would be best for Diru Dai to marry a woman without such thoughts and live a peaceful and happy life. According to Vena Wu's observation, a weak person like him couldn't become the spouse of Yamiel Tsun or herself. It had nothing to do with their difference in status; he just lacked the capacity to match them. That was why Yamiel Tsun turned down his proposal.

That's right... Yamiel Tsun and I are too strange... It is Diru Dai's misfortune to fall for

women like us...

Diru Dai will live on properly as a denizen of Forest's Edge in the future. Although seeing him spend the rest of his life with a partner he had no feelings for made Vena Wu sympathetic, but he could finally be released from the vicious cycle. What he gained would definitely be more than what he lost.

What kind of fate awaits me...? As a denizen of Forest's Edge, can I accompany my precious family properly until the very end...?

Vena Wu was young and couldn't imagine that at all.

She would meet Asuta and Shumimaru five years later... and she would spend even longer time to decide her feelings.

With no idea what kind of the future awaited, Vena Wu hurried home to her precious family.

Volume 8 End



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